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Maple

[image]

Rosemary padded through the forest near the fence that cut off the entrance to Twolegplace, sniffing curiously at a daisy. Every so often, she glanced furtively over her shoulder at the top of the fence. She wasn't supposed to be here–her mother had warned her countless times about the dangers of the forest, especially the wild cats that apparently ate kittypets and sharpened their claws on bone–but the little calico molly couldn't resist the temptation of having a little adventure. The stories always made her scoff. Why would any cat want to live in the forest, and more importantly, who would eat another cat? Besides, it wasn't as though she was planning on going too far in. She was simply going to have a quick look around, and she would go home before Night woke up from her afternoon nap.

'I can't wait to tell Apple and Reed about this,' Rosemary thought. *'I'll bet they were never brave enough to go into the forest.'*

Suddenly, without warning, something crashed into Rosemary, sending the young kittypet sprawling. She didn't even have time to recover before she was flattened by a mass of striped dark brown fur. As a strange scent filled her nostrils, she realized that her attacker was a young tom, but much bigger than any of the ones in Twolegplace. His muscles were hard underneath his thick tabby fur, and his claws pierced her like thorns as he raked them down her flank.

"Kittypet!" he sneered. "Get off of ThunderClan's territory if you know what's good for you!"

Fury and defiance welled up inside Rosemary. She didn't care who or what this "ThunderClan" was, but she wasn't about to let herself be bullied by some upstart tom. Summoning up what strength she had, she raked her claws down his face and used her back legs to fling her attacker off of her, sending him flying a few tail-lengths away. He looked stunned by her sudden counterattack. Rosemary

scrambled back to her paws, hissing as the dark brown tabby staggered back to his feet as well. *'Pathetic. When I was an apprentice in Thunderclan, I could take down a senior warrior.'* Rosemary thought with disgust.

'Wait- When I was in Thunderclan?! I don't even know what Thunderclan is! Where did that come from?!' Rosemary blinked surprised by her own thoughts.

"Pathetic," a new voice sneered, snapping Rosemary out of her thoughts. Rosemary turned her head to the side to see a blue-furred molly approaching them, followed by a massive gray and white tom with spiky fur. He was the one who had spoken. "I thought an apprentice that I trained would put up a better fight than that against a kittypet, Tigerpaw, but clearly I was wrong."

The now-named Tigerpaw flattened his ears. "I'm sorry, Thistleclaw. I'll do better next time."

"No matter now. I'll just finish what you started," Thistleclaw meowed smoothly, turning to face Rosemary again. He unsheathed his claws. "You did well against my apprentice, kittypet, but let's see how you fight against a real warrior."

Rosemary narrowed her eyes, sizing up her new opponent. Thistleclaw was massive, even bigger than Tigerpaw, and she knew that he would probably be able to kill her in one blow if he wanted. But she wasn't about to let him intimidate her just because she happened to be smaller. She let out a snarl of defiance and arched her back, pleased to see a look of surprise flicker across the gray warrior's face. *'Please, you act all tough and when some cat defies you, your facade comes crumbling down.'*

Before either of them could move, however, the blue-gray molly leaped in front of them. "That's enough, Thistleclaw!" she ordered. "Can't you see she's already hurt? You don't need to do anything else to her."

Glancing down at herself, Rosemary saw that the strange molly was right. Her flank was dripping with blood from several scratches, and she had a bite on her shoulder that stung like fury. She felt a pang

of dismay. What was her mother going to say when she came back looking the way she did? Then she realized she had another problem. These wounds were almost definitely going to leave scars, and then who was going to take her? She wasn't going to be pretty enough for any housefolk to want her anymore. Rosemary was certain of this; after all, one of her old friends, a molly named Freckle, had mysteriously disappeared after getting into a fight with a fox that had strayed into Twolegplace. She had survived the fight but had been left with multiple scars, and no one had seen any trace of her since. Freckle never even appeared in her housefolk's window, and there were rumors that a few other kittypets had seen them drop her off into the forest. *'Shit.'* Rosemary thought sadly.

"An intruder is an intruder, Bluefur! I'm just making sure the kittypet has learned her lesson," Thistleclaw growled.

"And you've done that. She won't dare trespass again," Bluefur meowed, sounding as though she was attempting to reason with her companion. Her blue eyes suddenly blazed with anger and she added, "And if I ever catch you doing something like that again, I'll report you to Sunstar!"

'Sunstar? Who's that? And what happened to Oakstar?' Rosemary wondered. *'There I go again. thinking about cats and stuff I don't remember.'*

Thistleclaw sneered and whirled around, storming off into the forest with Tigerpaw hurrying after him. Bluefur stared after them for a few moments before turning to Rosemary, her expression much gentler than it was a few moments ago. Rosemary tensed slightly as the older molly sniffed at her wounds, ready to fight to protect herself again if necessary.

"Relax. I'm not going to hurt you," Bluefur murmured. "Are you alright? Those look like some nasty scratches."

"I-I'm fine," Rosemary stammered. "But if my mother sees me, she's going to know I went into the forest. I'm going to be in so much trouble...and I don't think anyone will want a kittypet covered in scars. I'm not pretty enough for a Twoleg to want to keep me anymore."

"Well, you still are very pretty, if it makes you feel any better," Bluefur replied, and Rosemary purred gratefully. "But I can see where you're coming from. Tell you what, why don't you come back to my camp? I can ask my Clan's medicine cat to look at your wounds, and then I'll ask my leader if he'll let you stay. You put up a good fight against Tigerpaw today; I have a feeling he'll see potential in you."

Rosemary thought for a moment, then nodded. "Sure," she agreed. She didn't know what she was going to be getting herself into, but it had to be better than being abandoned and forced to wander this vast, expansive forest all on her own.

"So she returns." A brown tom meowed to a light brown brown she-cat with tiny brown spots, "How long until she falls back to the path of evil, Daughter?"

"Father, you have no faith in her." The light brown she-cat with ting brown spots responded, "She walks a different path now."

A dark blue-grey tom padded into the cave where the two sat. He walked up to the large shining stone that they looked into.

"You really think she can change her fate, Frecklewish?" Asked the dark blue-grey tom to the light brown she-cat with tiny brown spots.

"If you two have nothing but bad things to say, then leave!" spat Frecklewish, as she shook with rage. "Mapleshade will change her fate, no matter what you two think."

And with that Frecklewish turned and stalked out of the cave, hitting her tail against both toms.

Maple

The forest was much larger than Rosemary had remembered. It felt as though she had been following Bluefur for moons, and yet they still didn't seem to be any closer to reaching home. Rosemary's flanks were stinging and her paws ached, but she refused to let herself fall behind. She couldn't afford to show weakness now, especially since her only hope of finding a home would be with Bluefur and ThunderClan.

"Are you alright?" Bluefur asked, pausing at the top of a log. "We can always stop and rest if you want. I don't want you to aggravate your injuries any more than they already have been."

Rosemary shook her head fervently. "I'm okay," she answered. "Does this entire forest really belong to ThunderClan?"

"Well, part of it does," the blue-gray molly answered. "The forest is divided between four Clans-ThunderClan, WindClan, RiverClan, and ShadowClan. If Sunstar allows you to stay, you'll probably learn more about the history of the Clan territories."

"Who's Sunstar?" Rosemary asked curiously, following Bluefur deeper into the forest. *'I don't remember any cat with the prefix sun.'*

"Sunstar is the leader of my Clan. He's the one oversees everything that happens in the Clan, from settling issues with the other Clans to apprentice training, and even appointing new warriors," Bluefur meowed. "Thistleclaw and I are warriors. Tigerpaw is our Clan's apprentice, and Whitekit, Brindlekit, Redkit, Spottedkit, Willowkit, and Frostkit are waiting to become apprentices."

Rosemary frowned slightly. "Why do they all have names that end in 'kit'?" she asked. "And why aren't Whitekit, Brindlekit, Spottedkit, Redkit, Willowkit, and Frostkit allowed to be apprentices yet?"

"I'm impressed that you even noticed. All kits have names that have the suffix 'kit'. Those six aren't apprentices yet because they haven't

reached their sixth moon," the blue-furred queen told her. "When they become apprentices, they'll take on the suffix 'paw'-so Whitekit will become Whitepaw, for example. And then, once an apprentice has completed their warrior training, the Clan holds a special ceremony to honor them, and they're given a new name. There are other instances in which cats will have the same ending to their name. For example, all Clan leaders take on the suffix 'star' after receiving their nine lives from StarClan."

"Nine lives? Ceremony? StarClan?"

The blue-gray molly purred in amusement. "You'll understand in time, Rosemary," she meowed. "Our way of life may seem complicated to you at first, but I have no doubt you'll figure everything out in time."

Rosemary nodded. "I can see why you were named Bluefur," she remarked, looking over at her new friend's blue-gray pelt. "But I do have one more question. Was Thistleclaw named that way because he has spiky fur, or because his personality is about as pleasant as one of those stupid things?"

Bluefur snorted with laughter. "If Sunstar doesn't let you stay, he'll be making a grave mistake."

As soon as Rosemary and Bluefur entered the blue-gray warrior's camp, the eyes of every cat immediately turned towards them. A few of them looked suspicious, but Rosemary noticed that a few expressions were sympathetic as well. She guessed that they must have heard about what had happened-perhaps Tigerpaw or Thistleclaw had told them. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tigerpaw glaring at her, but she refused to meet his gaze.

A large tom with bright ginger fur and yellow eyes strode up to them. "Bluefur," he greeted her. "Thistleclaw informed me that there was an incident at the border today. Does this young one have anything to do with that?"

"A little. I'll explain what happened, but could I take Rosemary to Goosefeather first?" Bluefur requested. "She got clawed pretty badly

by Tigerpaw, and I want to get her wounds looked at as soon as possible."

"Of course, but meet me in my den after you're done," the ginger tom meowed.

"I will, Sunstar. Thank you," Bluefur meowed obediently, dipping her head.

She led Rosemary across the camp in the direction of a fern-covered clearing, pushing her way inside to reveal a small cave. Inside, two toms were sorting out piles of leaves and flowers. The older one had speckled gray fur and pale blue eyes, while the younger one was silver with amber eyes. Both of them turned to look at Bluefur and Rosemary, their eyes softening with worry when they saw the state the young kittypet was in.

"Hello Goosefeather, Featherwhisker," Bluefur meowed to the two toms. "Do you mind looking at her wounds? She got into a fight with Tigerpaw earlier."

"Of course. Bring her over here," the older tom replied, and Bluefur gently nudged her forward. He began applying cobwebs to the scratches on Rosemary's flank. Once he was finished with that, he chewed up a few marigold leaves and spat them onto her pelt.

"What are those supposed to be for?" she asked, trying to remember what a dark blue-grey tom had told her.

"The cobwebs are there to help stop the bleeding, and I'm using a marigold poultice to help prevent infection," he answered. He turned to the younger tom and meowed, "Featherwhisker, get me some poppy seeds from the stores. Two should do the trick."

Featherwhisker nodded and disappeared into the back of the medicine den. Rosemary watched him go curiously, then turned to Goosefeather again.

"Why do you need poppy seeds?" she inquired.

"I'm going to give them to you to help you sleep," the old tom replied. "You look as though you've had a long day, and I want you

to be well-rested for later."

Rosemary wanted to ask what was happening later, but she didn't want to annoy Goosefeather by asking any more questions. A few moments later, Featherwhisker returned with a leaf bundle clasped in his jaws. He set it down at her paws, opening it to reveal two black seeds placed delicately inside.

"I need to go speak to Sunstar now, but I'll be back later," Bluefur promised. She nodded to the ginger molly and added, "Feel better, Rosemary."

With that, she turned and disappeared out of the medicine den, her tail swishing behind her as she padded away. Despite knowing that she would see the blue-gray cat again soon, Rosemary couldn't suppress a pang of worry. What if Sunstar didn't let her stay? It seemed nice here in ThunderClan; she didn't want to go back to being a kittypet.

"So, what happened to you anyway?" Goosefeather asked, dragging her attention onto him.

"I decided to go exploring while my mother was napping," Rosemary meowed. "I was looking at a flower when he attacked me. We fought for a while and Thistleclaw tried to join in, but Bluefur wouldn't let him."

Goosefeather shook his head. "Thistleclaw has always been a bloodthirsty, ambitious young warrior, and it's only gotten worse since Snowfur died. The warrior code forbids attacking kits, but it seems as though he's forgotten that."

Rosemary wondered who this Snowfur cat was, but she decided that it would be best to let the matter drop. She had a feeling it wasn't really any of her business anyway. Besides, she would probably find out in due time if she was allowed to stay in ThunderClan.

The old medicine cat nudged the poppy seeds in her direction. "Eat these," he ordered. "And then get some sleep. We'll wake you up if anything important happens."

Rosemary nodded obediently and lapped up the tiny black seeds. Instantly, she felt her eyelids beginning to grow heavy. Letting out a yawn, she curled her tail over her back legs and laid her head in between her forepaws, allowing a wave of sleep to claim her.

Rosemary felt a wave of pain as she felt claws rake her cheek.

"Leave, you are no longer a warrior of --! You have dishonored the Code. Take you kits and leave. If you are found on ----- territory by tomorrow, my warriors have every right to kill you," spat a brown tabby tom, his eyes full of rage for something Rosemary didn't do.

She felt cold, rain fell hard on her fur, three tiny balls of wet kittens were pressed to her front legs. Rosemary picked up one of them and turned around, leaving the clearing full of enraged cats. She forced the freezing kits to a river.

"Momma, I'm cold!" wailed the kit in her jaws, his siblings agreeing.

"Just a little longer, Patchkit. We're going to live with your father," Rosemary meowed around the kit, "We're at the crossing point. Petalkit, you go first, Larchkit, you follow her, me and Patchkit will go last."

One by one Rosemary and the kits crossed the river.

"Momma!" cried Petalkit, her body frozen, a fearful look in her eyes.

Rosemary turned to look at what Petalkit was so worried about, only to screech in fear as well, when she spotted a large wave. She was knocked into the raging river, Patchkit ripped from her grip. She opened her mouth trying to call for the kits, only to get a mouth full of water. Panic filled her mind as she realized she couldn't see the three kits. *'NO!'* Rosemary tried swimming, she breached the rivers surface, only to be thrown back under. *'The kits... the.... kits....'*

When Rosemary woke up from the nightmare, the first thing she realized was that the fur around her neck suddenly felt much cooler

than before. It didn't take long to figure out the reason. Lying a few tail-lengths away, ripped in half, was her collar. She stared at it in confusion, wondering how and when it had been removed.

"Goosefeather removed that for you while you were asleep," Featherwhisker meowed, emerging from the back of the medicine den. "If you're going to stay in ThunderClan with us, then you can't be wearing a collar."

"Yeah, of course. Sorry, I should have thought to remove it before I came here," Rosemary meowed apologetically.

Featherwhisker's ear twitched. "Don't worry about it. You had a long day," he reassured her. "But while I'm here, how are your wounds feeling?"

"Better," Rosemary answered truthfully. "They don't hurt as much anymore."

"That's good. Sunstar is going to call a meeting soon, so-"

Featherwhisker's next words were cut off as a voice yowled from outside, "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

The silver tom shook his head in amusement and looked down at Rosemary. "Well, that's our call. Come on, we need to go meet the rest of the Clan."

Rosemary climbed back to her feet and followed Featherwhisker out of the medicine den and into the clearing. A throng of cats was gathered at the base of a large rock, all of them looking to the top eagerly. Sunstar stood on top of the rock, his head raised proudly as he waited for the Clan to gather. A few paces away, Rosemary saw Bluefur sitting next to a gray tabby molly with a tail the color of a rose. She glanced over at Featherwhisker, and when he nodded, she went to join her friend. Bluefur touched her tail to her shoulder in greeting but didn't remove her gaze from Sunstar.

"Clanmates, it was brought to my attention that Tigerpaw, Thistleclaw, and Bluefur encountered a young kittypet while on

patrol earlier today," Sunstar meowed from the top of the Highrock. "Although the kittypet showed no sign of being a threat and was, in fact, still a kit, Tigerpaw and Thistleclaw saw fit to attack her."

There were several exclamations of horror as a few of the ThunderClan cats began whispering amongst themselves. Rosemary saw a black molly looking at Tigerpaw with something like disappointment in her gaze, while a few tail-lengths away, a dark red molly with a gray muzzle glared furiously at Thistleclaw.

"Tigerpaw, as punishment for your behavior today, you will clean the elders' den for three moons. You will also not be allowed to attend Gatherings during that time, and if I hear that you're slacking off on your duties, one moon will be added to your punishment," Sunstar went on. "Thistleclaw, you are also banned from Gatherings for three moons, and you will not be Tigerpaw's mentor anymore." *'Serves him right.'*

The gray and white warrior jerked his head up. "What?!" he exclaimed, outraged. "You can't do that!"

"Do not tell me what I can and cannot do, Thistleclaw. I am your leader, and my word is law," the bright ginger tom meowed in a voice that invited no argument. Thistleclaw glowered at Sunstar but wisely chose to back off.

"Leopardfoot," Sunstar continued, turning to the black molly. "I don't normally allow kin to mentor kin, but you are a capable warrior and you may be exactly what Tigerpaw needs. Therefore, you will continue his training."

Leopardfoot dipped her head respectfully. "Of course, Sunstar," she meowed.

She padded forward and touched noses with Tigerpaw. Even from where she sat, Rosemary could see the sorrowful, almost motherly look in the black warrior's eyes. Tigerpaw, for his part, was looking almost embarrassed about having Leopardfoot as his mentor. She wondered why then decided she didn't have time to concern herself with him. *'That tom deserves to be embarrassed.'*

"There is one more ceremony I want to perform," Sunstar meowed, snapping Rosemary's attention back onto him. "Bluefur tells me that our young kittypet friend did well in fighting back against Tigerpaw and Thistleclaw today. If she wishes, I would like to invite her to become a member of ThunderClan. So Rosemary, will you accept our offer and train to become a warrior?"

Rosemary felt her fur prickle with excitement, but she managed to keep her voice calm as she replied, "I will."

"Then from this moment on, until you earn your warrior name, you will be known as Maplepaw," Sunstar meowed, and the calico molly felt a small prickle of surprise. She had assumed that Sunstar would simply name her Rosemarypaw. Not that she didn't like her new name, of course. "Bluefur, you are ready for your first apprentice. I trust that you will pass on all that I taught you, as well as the skills you learned from Stonepelt, onto this young apprentice."

Maplepaw felt a surge of delight as Bluefur nodded in acceptance, touching her nose to the younger cat's as Leopardfoot and Tigerpaw had done. She was going to become a ThunderClan warrior! Even better, Bluefur was going to be the one training her. Then she realized that Tigerpaw was glaring at her from the other side of the clearing. Maplepaw flashed him a look of defiance and turned her head away. She was an apprentice of ThunderClan just like him. If he thought that he was going to intimidate her, he had another think coming. Whether anyone else liked it or not, Maplepaw was a member of ThunderClan again, and she was here to stay. If Tigerpaw had a problem with that, well, he would just have to learn to deal with it.

"Why did Sunstar accept her?! She'll bring nothing but death to the clans!" spat Oakstar, his tail swinging back and forth with anger.

Frecklewish whipped her head to her father, "You don't know that yet! Give her a chance!"

"And then what? Wait for some Dark Forest cat to tell her the truth?"

"Bluefur is guiding her! And you know Bluefur's destiny!" Frecklewish spat, shaking with rage.

Tiger

When Tigerpaw woke up the next morning, Maplepaw was already sitting outside the apprentices' den, staring absentmindedly around the camp. She glanced over at him as he passed by but didn't say anything, curling her tail over her paws and letting her gaze drift over to the warriors' den. It was clear that the calico molly had no intention of striking up a conversation with him, and he was fine with that. The fact that he was stuck with a kittypet for a denmate was already embarrassing enough; the less he had to be reminded of her existence, the better.

'What was Sunstar thinking, letting her join ThunderClan?' Tigerpaw thought mutinously, glaring at Maplepaw's back. *'It's her fault I'm in trouble. If she had just stayed in Twolegplace where she belongs, this would never have happened. I'd still have Thistleclaw as my mentor too.'*

At last, Bluefur and Leopardfoot emerged from the warriors' den. The two warriors padded over to their apprentices, pausing at the fresh-kill pile and selecting two mice each. Bluefur dropped a mouse in front of Maplepaw and sat down beside her apprentice, while Tigerpaw's mother brought him a meal of his own.

"You know, you two are allowed to take food from the fresh-kill pile when you wake up," Leopardfoot told the two apprentices. "You don't have to wait until everyone else is awake to eat breakfast."

"Thanks, Leopardfoot," Maplepaw meowed, sounding a bit uncomfortable. Tigerpaw just nodded.

"Eat as quickly as you can. We have a long day ahead of us," Bluefur meowed. "We'll be patrolling the ShadowClan border today."

The two apprentices nodded and quickly wolfed down their mice. Once they were finished, they got up and followed Bluefur and Leopardfoot out of the camp. As the exited through the gorse tunnel, they passed by Rosetail and Thrushpelt. Maplepaw nodded to the two warriors as they walked by, but Tigerpaw simply ignored

them. After everything that had happened the previous evening, he had no desire to be friendly with any of his Clanmates.

Fortunately, his companions seemed to be content to let the patrol pass by in silence. Well, Bluefur did make sure to quiz Maplepaw on a few of the land markings they passed by, but everyone left Tigerpaw alone for the most part. Despite his violent apathy towards the former kittypet, Tigerpaw had to admit that she was a quick learner. Of course, the topics she was being tested on were concepts easily grasped by the smallest kit, but at least she wasn't completely useless.

Soon, the four cats had reached the Thunderpath that separated ThunderClan's forest from ShadowClan's damp, dark woodland. As they approached the border, Maplepaw stopped suddenly, her face screwed up in obvious disgust.

"Ugh!" the calico molly exclaimed. "What is that? It smells like something died here, crowfood, and the dirtplace all mixed in one!"

"That's ShadowClan scent," Bluefur meowed, her whiskers twitching in amusement. "The scent here is fairly fresh, so do you know what that means?"

"We found the source of the disgusting stench?" Maplepaw suggested.

Tigerpaw rolled his eyes and meowed, "It can mean one of two things. Either a patrol has just passed by the area, or there are ShadowClan cats nearby, but we can't see them."

"Very good, Tigerpaw," Leopardfoot praised her son, and Tigerpaw shot Maplepaw a mocking glance. "And would you say that the ShadowClan cats have crossed onto our territory?"

This time, it was Maplepaw who answered. "No," the calico molly meowed. "We're downwind from where the scent is coming from–I can feel a breeze coming from the other side of the border. The breeze is probably blowing the ShadowClan scent onto our territory."

"Well done, Maplepaw ," Bluefur meowed approvingly. Tigerpaw waited to see if Maplepaw would say or do anything as payment for him taunting her earlier, but she didn't even glance his way. "Now, if you two happen to run into a ShadowClan patrol on our territory, what should you do?"

Tigerpaw didn't even hesitate this time. "Attack, of course," he retorted. "They're on our territory and they need to be driven off. The warrior code demands that we chase off all trespassers."

Bluefur and Leopardfoot glanced between themselves. "Well, that is one option," the black molly replied finally. "But do you really think it's wise to take on an entire patrol by yourself–one that consists of warriors far more experienced in battle than you are?"

"I could take on a ShadowClan patrol any day," Tigerpaw meowed confidently. He was the strongest cat in ThunderClan, after all–well, second-strongest after Thistleclaw, but he would get to the top one day.

"You?" Maplepaw asked, her topaz-yellow eyes filled with disbelief. It was the first time she'd spoken to him or acknowledged his presence all morning. "What could you do? You're just an apprentice!"

"I've been training as a warrior for one moon. That's more than a puny kittypet like you could say," Tigerpaw sneered.

Maplepaw just rolled her eyes. "How impressive, an entire moon of training," she meowed, not even bothering to hide the condescending note in her voice. "The other Clans must be trembling in their nests knowing that you're on our side, O Mighty and Noble Tigerpaw. Why I wouldn't be surprised if they just turned tail and ran back home at the sight of you."

"That's enough, both of you," Bluefur ordered before Tigerpaw could respond. "We still have a lot of work to do, and this isn't the time to argue amongst ourselves."

"Sorry, Bluefur," Maplepaw meowed contritely, ducking her head.

"Tigerpaw?" Leopardfoot spoke up. "Do you have anything to add?"

Tigerpaw glared down at his paws, then muttered, "Sorry."

"I'm sorry?" his mother prompted. "I didn't quite catch what you said."

"I said I'm sorry," Tigerpaw meowed, sighing in exasperation.

Leopardfoot gave him a disapproving look but chose not to press the matter any further. She and Bluefur turned and kept walking along the ShadowClan border, with Maplepaw following after the two warriors. Tigerpaw glared after them for a few heartbeats, then got up and started walking after them as well. As they walked, Bluefur continued quizzing Maplepaw on different landmarks, but Tigerpaw was no longer interested in eavesdropping. Somehow, he had ended up in an even worse mood than when he'd left the camp if that was even possible.

By the time they returned back to the camp, the dark tabby apprentice wanted nothing more than to take a piece of fresh-kill and curl up in his nest. Unfortunately, it seemed that StarClan had other plans for him. Before he could make one move towards the prey pile, he found his path being blocked by his mother.

"And where do you think you're going?" she asked. "You still need to take care of the elders, remember? Come on, it's time to go fetch fresh bedding for them, and then once you're done with that, you need to visit Goosefeather to get mouse bile for any ticks they have."

Oh, right.

Somehow, Tigerpaw had managed to forget that he was still on punishment for attacking Maplepaw. Now that he had been reminded, however, his foul mood increased tenfold. He turned to glare at the calico apprentice, but she was nowhere to be seen. She must have left while he wasn't paying attention. Growling in frustration, Tigerpaw stalked past Leopardfoot and headed back into the forest to gather fresh moss. Every passing moment seemed

to increase his resentment of the former kittypet. First, she got him in trouble and lost him his mentor, and then she had the nerve to taunt him. This was why the Clan forbade mingling with kittypets. They brought nothing but trouble. The only comfort Tigerpaw had now was that he wouldn't have to deal with Maplepaw forever. Sooner or later, she would realize that Clan life was too much for her, and she would run back to her Twolegs where she belonged. Tigerpaw was absolutely certain of this. All he had to do was be a little patient, and before he knew it, she would be out of his life for good.

"She will change the path of blood Tigerpaw will follow," commented a large golden tom.

"Thunderstar? What do you mean?" Asked Petalkit.

"You will see," Tunderstar murmured before fading away.

Maple

Maplepaw was sitting outside the nursery, watching Whitekit playing with Brindlekit and Frostkit. A few paces away, Redkit was batting at a butterfly with his paws as Willowkit and Spottedkit inspected a small yellow flower. At one point, Brindlekit tumbled in front of the calico apprentice, who moved her paws out of the way so they wouldn't get run over.

It had been nearly half a moon since the former kittypet had joined ThunderClan. Since then, most of the Clan seemed to have gotten used to her presence. The only exceptions were Thistleclaw and Tigerpaw, but Maplepaw couldn't care less about what either of them had to say. As long as they didn't go out of their way to bother her, she was perfectly content to pretend they didn't exist. Fortunately, neither of them was interested in interacting with her, so she didn't have anything to worry about on that front.

"Enjoying yourself there, Maplepaw?"

Maplepaw turned her head to see Rosetail padding over to her. "I'm doing okay," she replied. "The kits are entertaining, at least."

"Where's Bluefur? I thought she was going to take you out hunting today," Rosetail meowed, looking puzzled.

"Sunstar asked her to check Sunningrocks for any RiverClan warriors. I guess the patrols have been scenting them there a lot recently," Maplepaw answered, remembering the apologetic look on her mentor's face when she told her that their hunting trip would have to be put on hold. "I asked Bluefur if I could come, but she didn't want me there in case we ran into any trouble. She says I'm not ready to take on a real battle yet."

"That's probably wise," the older molly admitted with a nod. "We don't want our apprentices getting killed before they can become warriors."

"But I thought the warrior code said that we're not supposed to kill in battle unless we have to," Maplepaw meowed, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

Rosetail nodded. "It does, but that part of the warrior code tends to be forgotten at times," she answered. "And we've had so many skirmishes with RiverClan over those rocks, it wouldn't surprise me if one of them let the heat of battle get the best of them one of these days."

"Best of luck to Tigerpaw, then," the calico molly snorted. Her denmate had tagged along with Bluefur, as well as Leopardfoot, Thrushpelt, and Stormtail. Maplepaw could just imagine how his head would inflate if he got the chance to battle against RiverClan.

"What's wrong with Tigerpaw?" Rosetail asked curiously.

"What isn't wrong with Tigerpaw?" Maplepaw retorted. "Every single time he talks to me–which, luckily for me, doesn't happen too often–he's either mocking me about being a kittypet or talking about how he's going to be the best warrior in the Clan one day. He's so full of himself, I'm honestly amazed he can even walk with that fat head on his shoulders. That alone is an accomplishment worthy of becoming a warrior already. I'll be looking forward to when Whitekit finally becomes an apprentice. At least then, I'll finally have a denmate worth talking to."

She knew that she was being mean, but she couldn't bring herself to care. If Tigerpaw wasn't going to make an effort to be at least cordial towards her, then she saw no reason to do the same for him. It was only fair, after all. Besides, he obviously didn't like her, so it wasn't as though she was hurting his feelings.

Maplepaw turned her attention back to the kits, feeling a slight pang in her heart as she watched them play. Although they weren't nearly as close, she couldn't help being reminded of her own siblings, Reed, and Apple, back in Twolegplace, and she wondered how her family was faring. She hadn't even said goodbye to them before she left; were they worried when she didn't come home? What must her mother have been thinking? Her life in ThunderClan had been wonderful for the most part, but Maplepaw couldn't deny

that she missed the comfort of having her kin nearby that her Clanmates took for granted.

A small rustling sound jerked Maplepaw out of her thoughts. Turning her head, she saw that Bluefur's patrol had finally returned from patrolling Sunningrocks. None of them appeared to be sporting any fresh wounds, so she assumed that meant they hadn't run into any trouble. Maplepaw jumped to her paws and bounded over to greet the patrol.

"Did you find anyone there?" she asked eagerly. She had a feeling she knew the answer already, but she wanted to make sure.

"Just a RiverClan warrior named Oakheart, but we chased him off without a fight," Leopardfoot answered. "RiverClan might be full of mouse-brains, but even they know better than to take on a full patrol with just one warrior."

"Just one warrior?" Maplepaw asked, bewildered. Oakheart was either extremely brave or extremely foolish if he was willing to trespass on ThunderClan territory without backup. "What was he doing?"

Bluefur snorted. "He was sleeping," the blue-gray molly scoffed. Although her voice was contemptuous, there was an odd undertone to it that Maplepaw couldn't place. She wondered at it for a few moments but decided it wasn't worth her time to investigate.

Then she realized what her mentor had said. "He was sleeping?" she repeated in disbelief. Well, I guess that answers the question of whether he's brave or an idiot. "What was he doing that for? Couldn't he take a nap on his own territory?"

"For once in my life, I agree with you," Tigerpaw remarked, but Maplepaw just ignored him as usual.

"Who knows why RiverClan warriors do anything?" Bluefur asked with a sigh. She shook her head. "Anyway, I believe we were supposed to go out hunting today? That is if you're still up for it."

"Of course!" Maplepaw agreed eagerly, feeling a rush of excitement.

"Alright," Bluefur meowed, chuckling as she flicked her apprentice's ear gently with her tail. "Just give me a moment while I–"

But Maplepaw had no intention of sitting around in the camp any longer while Bluefur took care of whatever business she had to attend to. After being stuck at home all day, she was looking forward to getting to stretch her legs a little. Before Bluefur could finish her sentence, Maplepaw took off through the gorse tunnel, nearly knocking Tigerpaw off his paws in the process. As she sped through the forest, she could hear her mentor chasing after her, panting as she tried to keep up with the calico m1olly.

"Maplepaw, I said wait! I still need to report to Sunstar! And there are foxes and badgers around here, you know! For the love of StarClan, how does a cat with such small legs move so quickly?"

Frecklewish snorted, "Still impatient even now."

Laughter echoed around the cave. Darkstar stayed quiet. Her eyes trained on the young calico she-cat. *'She wouldn't have to be given a second chance of I wasn't cruel.'* Darkstar stood up and left the cave.

"Darkstar?" Called Reedshine.

"I need some fresh air. Don't worry Reedshine," she shoot a small smile to her warrior.

Tiger

One moon had passed since Maplepaw had joined ThunderClan. Over time, Tigerpaw had slowly gotten used to the fact that the former kittypet would forever be a part of his life. He didn't like it, of course, but he accepted that he couldn't do anything to change it. Besides, he admitted, it wasn't as though her presence was entirely horrible. While she certainly wasn't anything special in terms of skills required to become a warrior, Maplepaw certainly knew how to keep things interesting between them.

Finally, there was someone in the Clan who didn't stare in amazement every time he boasted about what a powerful warrior he was. She could say whatever she wanted, and for the most part, Tigerpaw let her get away with it. Not because he thought she had a point, of course; he still had his pride. In a way, however, he found her blunt honesty almost refreshing.

It didn't hurt that she was fairly cute as well. Even Tigerpaw could appreciate that. Her bright, calico fur was sleek and glossy, and her topaz-yellow eyes could either glow as soft as the newleaf sun or pierce deep into one's soul, depending on what mood she was in. Every emotion could be seen in their depths, and Tigerpaw found himself looking at them constantly, even though whenever they were turned on him, they were filled with revulsion.

Of course, he still didn't like her. He just thought that she wasn't the most hideous cat in the forest, that was all. Anyway, it wasn't as though looks meant anything. She could be the most stunning cat in the Clan, and it still wouldn't make her a halfway respectable warrior.

Despite his disinterest in the former kittypet, however, Tigerpaw had still learned quite a bit about her from eavesdropping on her conversations with the queens. He had been surprised to learn that she had difficulties with her family as well, with her two siblings constantly making her the target of their jokes and cruelty. Tigerpaw couldn't help wondering what his own littermates would

have been like if they had survived. Would he have a good relationship with them?

She had also mentioned that there were rumors that one of the kittypets, an old tom named Pine, had once lived in the forest. When he had heard that, Tigerpaw wanted to beg StarClan to open up a hole in the ground and swallow him up. He just knew who Maplepaw was talking about. Fortunately, she didn't seem to make the connection between the former ThunderClan leader and her denmate, and no one else saw any reason to say anything.

Almost instinctively, Tigerpaw glanced at the gorse tunnel. Maplepaw had gone out on a hunting assessment earlier that day, and she still hadn't returned. Part of him wondered if she had run into any trouble, but the logical part of his mind argued that she was still busy.

'Wait, why do I even care?' he thought, shaking his head to clear it. *'If she doesn't come back from her assessment, that's not my problem.'*

A few moments later, however, the gorse tunnel shook as Maplepaw and Bluefur padded into the camp. And almost immediately, it became apparent that something was wrong. The two cats were clutching several pieces of prey in their jaws, so Maplepaw had almost definitely passed her assessment. But there was no joy in her blue eyes, no sense of pride in such an accomplishment. Instead, her tail dragged on the ground behind her, and her expression displayed nothing but deep, weary sadness.

"Welcome back, you two," Thrushpelt meowed, padding over to greet his Clanmates. Tigerpaw almost snorted aloud when he saw the look of longing flash across the older tom's face as he looked at Bluefur. It was so obvious that he was in love with her, even a blind rat could see it. "Looks like Maplepaw did well on her assessment today."

"She did," Bluefur meowed quietly, casting a worried look at her apprentice. Thrushpelt followed her gaze, frowning in concern when he saw the downcast expression on the young molly's face.

"Is everything okay?" he asked gently.

Instead of answering, Maplepaw just flicked her tail and padded past Thrushpelt, dropping her load off into the fresh-kill pile. Thistleclaw was standing beside the pile, and he cast the calico molly a disdainful look as she passed by him.

"Back so soon?" he taunted. "What, are you telling me you couldn't even finish your assessment? I'm not surprised, coming from a pathetic kittypet like you."

Maplepaw shot Thistleclaw a look so full of hatred, disdain, and annoyance that Tigerpaw was surprised when the gray and white warrior didn't burst into flames. He stepped back, clearly startled by the intensity of her sapphire-blue gaze. But she didn't say a word; instead, she merely turned away and kept walking, twitching her ear as though Thistleclaw was merely a fly that needed to be swatted away.

"What happened to her?" Tigerpaw heard Thrushpelt ask Bluefur in a low voice.

"There was an incident while she was on her assessment," the blue-gray warrior answered softly. "I sent her along the Twolegplace border, and she ran into her sister while she was there. The two of them got into an argument–apparently, Maplepaw's mother passed away recently, and her sister blamed her for it. She told Maplepaw that their mother stopped caring for herself after she disappeared and that it was her fault that she was dead."

"That's awful," Thrushpelt exclaimed, still keeping his voice low. "How did Maplepaw react to that?"

"Pretty much as well as you would expect," Bluefur answered dryly. Her eyes softened with sadness as she added, "I managed to get her to calm down, but I thought it would be best to end her assessment early. She did well enough to pass, at any rate."

Hearing that, Tigerpaw couldn't help feeling sorry for Maplepaw. Even she didn't deserve to be treated that way by her own sister. He turned away and padded over to the calico molly, who was sitting just outside the apprentices' den. Her eyes were still dull with sadness, and she didn't even make an attempt to lick the dirt from

her fur.

"Maplepaw?" he meowed hesitantly.

In an instant, Maplepaw's head swiveled towards him, her blue eyes now blazing red with defiance. Tigerpaw took a step back, shocked at the sudden intensity in her gaze.

"What do you want?" she hissed. "Come to taunt me about coming home early, have you? You're still just like Thistleclaw even though he isn't your mentor anymore."

"N-no, that's not what I was doing," Tigerpaw stammered, taking a step back. "I just wanted to see if you were alright."

"A likely story," Maplepaw snorted, her voice laced with bitterness. "Since when do you act as though you care about me? Never. Well, guess what, Tigerpaw? I don't care what you have to say about me anymore. You mean nothing to me. So call me whatever names you can think of if it makes you feel better about yourself. It's not like any of it matters in the end."

With that, she turned around and disappeared into the apprentices' den. Tigerpaw stared after her for a few heartbeats, then got up and padded away, deciding to let her be for now. If she didn't want to talk to him, he wasn't going to force the issue. Besides, he thought to himself, perhaps this would be a good thing. At least this way, he wouldn't have to see her for at least a few hours. It wasn't much, admittedly, but he would take what he could get.

Later that night, Tigerpaw tossed and turned in his sleep, shivering as the cold, crisp air bit at his fur. It was almost leaf-fall, and there was already a noticeable nip to the air. He cursed silently, curling into a tight ball to try to keep warm. Leaf-fall had always been his favorite season, but he couldn't deny that he would much rather do without the cold weather that came with it.

A moment later, however, he realized that the increasingly frigid weather wasn't the only reason for his discomfort. Maplepaw's nest was empty as well, with no trace of the calico molly anywhere in

sight. Confused, Tigerpaw stood up and padded out of the apprentices' den, glancing around the camp to see if he could spot his denmate anywhere. But she was nowhere to be found.

'She didn't leave the camp, did she?'

Tigerpaw walked towards the gorse tunnel, trying to see where Maplepaw's scent trail led. Her scent was still fairly fresh, so she couldn't have gotten very far. He picked up his pace slightly, following the trail through the gorse tunnel and into the woods. As he sniffed around to see where she had gone, Tigerpaw told himself firmly that he wasn't doing this because he cared about the kittypet. He just didn't want to risk being blamed for her disappearance if someone else happened to wake up and find her missing.

Finally, he stumbled across her at Fourtrees, gazing up at the four great oaks. Cautiously, Tigerpaw padded up to her, tapping her on the shoulder with his tail. Maplepaw turned to look at him, her eyes filling with anger when she saw him standing behind her.

"What are you doing here?" she spat angrily. "Did you follow me? No, don't answer that, obviously, you must have. For StarClan's sake, why can't you just leave me in peace?"

"I just wanted to see where you were," Tigerpaw defended himself. "If you disappear like that, some cat's bound to go looking for you. Besides, I'm not doing it for you. I just don't want you to get me in trouble again."

"Get you in trouble? I haven't gotten you into anything!" Maplepaw snarled, her tail lashing. "See, that's the problem with you, Tigerpaw. You can't ever take responsibility for your actions. Every time you make a mistake, you always find a way to blame it on someone else. You didn't have to follow me here. I can take care of myself and I know my way back to the camp. But if you happen to do something well, you just have to take all the credit. I honestly can't believe that you're able to get out of your nest in the morning with that fat head on your shoulders. You disgust me and I hate you!"

Tigerpaw stared at her, stunned.

Without waiting for him to respond, Maplepaw whirled around and stormed off. But she wasn't heading back in the direction of the ThunderClan camp. Instead, she was making a beeline straight for the WindClan border. Snapping out of his momentary stupor, Tigerpaw chased after his denmate, swerving around her and cutting off her path.

"What are you doing?" he hissed furiously. "You can't go that way!"

"Get out of my way, Tigerpaw!" Maplepaw spat. "This is none of your business!"

"You can't just go trespassing on another Clan's territory!" Tigerpaw snapped.

Maplepaw glared at him. "You don't know what this is about, so just back off," she meowed rudely.

She tried to walk around him, but Tigerpaw merely blocked her path again. Maplepaw let out a hiss of frustration, her claws sliding out.

"Get out of the way!" she snarled. "And for StarClan's sake, leave me alone! I have somewhere I need to be, and I don't need you being a pain in the tail!"

"And where do you need to be that requires you to trespass on WindClan's hunting grounds?" Tigerpaw asked. He knew that he was annoying her, but he was secretly enjoying himself.

"That's none of–"

"You can say that it's none of my business all you want, but it isn't going to make me get out of your way."

Maplepaw glared at him for a few more heartbeats. Then her anger seemed to flee, her eyes growing a dull sapphire-blue and her tail hitting the ground. Suddenly, she seemed even more defeated and sad than when she'd arrived back at the camp earlier that day.

"I was trying to go to the Moonstone," she meowed, letting out a long sigh. "Bluefur told me once that the Moonstone is where the

Clans go to speak with StarClan, and I thought...maybe if I went, I would get to see my mother."

'Oh.'

Tigerpaw didn't know what to say to that. He felt guilty for upsetting her now. Of course, she just wanted to see her mother again. What cat wouldn't?

Maplepaw shook her head, turning around and stalking back in the direction of the ThunderClan camp. Just before she disappeared, however, she turned to face Tigerpaw one last time, a cold look growing in her ruby eyes.

"If you breathe one word about this to anyone–and I do mean anyone–then I will never forgive you," she hissed. "Are we clear?"

With that, she turned around again and kept walking. This time, she didn't stop to look back.

"You were a loving cat, Night," Frecklewish murmured, her voice soft and gentle.

"Thank you for letting me be here," Night responded, her blue eyes shining softly.

Tiger

All in all, this had not been one of Maplepaw's better days.

Somehow, she had gotten coerced into going on a hunting patrol with Bluefur, Adderfang, Tigerpaw, and Thistleclaw. While Maplepaw certainly didn't mind spending time with her mentor–and Adderfang wasn't bad company either–Tigerpaw and Thistleclaw managed to turn it into the most unbearable experience she'd ever had to deal with. Ever since they had left the camp, Thistleclaw hadn't stopped talking about his plans to "mark the borders with the blood of their enemies", as he put it. Maplepaw was seriously starting to consider asking Goosefeather if there were any herbs he could give the gray and white warrior to get him to stop talking.

'StarClan knows why anyone lets him out of the camp at all,' the young apprentice thought, curling her lip. *'He's as mad as a fox that's had its tail bitten off.'*

The best that could be said about the situation was that Tigerpaw was leaving her alone. Indeed, he had mostly stopped bothering her ever since their nighttime encounter in the forest half a moon ago. He was still as arrogant as ever, but he hadn't tried to follow her out of the camp again.

"Could we stop and hunt for a bit?" Tigerpaw requested. "I haven't eaten anything since yesterday, and I'm starving."

"That sounds like a good idea," Adderfang agreed, glancing at Bluefur. The blue-gray warrior nodded to show that she approved. "We'll wait here. Let's see how much prey you and Maplepaw can bring back."

"I can catch more than her any day," Tigerpaw snorted. Maplepaw rolled her eyes.

Bluefur shook her head tiredly. "Stick close together, you two," she ordered. "And try to be back by sunhigh."

Maplepaw glanced up at the sky. The sun was nearing its peak, but it would be a while before it got there. They would have plenty of time to bring back a nice meal for their Clanmates. Nodding a quick farewell to the older warriors, she turned and followed Tigerpaw deeper into the forest.

It didn't take long for her to spot her first catch. A large rabbit was burrowing through some leaves, perhaps searching for a meal of its own. Maplepaw dropped into the hunting crouch, careful to keep her pawsteps light as she padded towards her unsuspecting prey, avoiding the twigs and leaves that scattered the forest floor. Once she was a mere two tail-lengths away, she pounced, killing the rabbit with one swift bite to the neck. Feeling triumphant, she sat up, the large rabbit dangling from her jaws.

"Not bad," Tigerpaw called out to her.

Maplepaw turned her head to see her denmate with a catch of his own: a fat blackbird. "Er, thanks," she meowed awkwardly. "Looks like you got a pretty good one yourself."

Tigerpaw puffed up his chest proudly. "Of course. Did you expect anything less of a great warrior such as myself?"

'And there's the Tigerpaw we all know and love,' Maplepaw thought, rolling her eyes to herself. Out loud, she replied, "Whatever helps you sleep at night, Tigerpaw."

The two apprentices continued along the WindClan border for a short while. During that time, Maplepaw managed to catch a squirrel, two mice, and a vole. Tigerpaw, for his part, had acquired two magpies, a starling, and three pigeons. The calico apprentice was surprised to find that, when he wasn't sulking or insulting her, Tigerpaw actually made for a respectable hunter.

"Tigerpaw?" Maplepaw meowed after a few more moments had passed. "It's about sunhigh now. We should probably head back before the patrol comes looking for us."

The dark brown tabby glanced up at the sky. "You're right," he agreed. "Come on, let's collect our prey and get going."

Before they could start their trek back to the patrol, however, a light snapping sound caught their attention. Maplepaw swiveled her ears in the direction of the sound, glancing around to see if she could find who or what had made it. As she did so, a familiar stench filled her nostrils. Of course, she had been smelling it for quite some time since she was right next to the border, but this was different. This scent was fresh, and with no breeze in the air, she knew it wasn't coming from the other side of the Thunderpath. She glanced over at Tigerpaw and saw that his eyes were narrowed. He had picked it up as well.

"ShadowClan," the dark tabby hissed. "Come on, let's see what they're up to."

"We should go back and warn the others," Maplepaw argued. "We don't know how many cats there are. There might be too many for us to take on alone."

"If you want to run back to the warriors like the pathetic kittypet you are, then feel free," Tigerpaw spat. "I'm going to defend my territory."

Without another word, he took off in the direction of the ShadowClan patrol's scent. Maplepaw stared after her denmate, anger pulsating in her belly. Then she shook her head and took off after him. Even if she wasn't fond of him, she wasn't about to let her Clanmate get himself killed by a ShadowClan patrol. Not that she was doing it for him, of course. She just didn't want Leopardfoot to lose her only son.

She caught up with Tigerpaw a few moments later, crouching behind a large yew bush. Two ShadowClan warriors and an apprentice were standing two fox-lengths away. He glanced over at her but didn't say anything, although he motioned with his tail for her to keep quiet. Maplepaw rolled her eyes and turned away irritably; she could have figured out that she needed to be quiet without his help.

"Come on, let's confront them before they get any ideas," Tigerpaw whispered.

"Whatever you say," Maplepaw whispered back.

Together, the two apprentices stood up from their hiding spot and strode forward to greet the three ShadowClan cats. The patrol turned their heads sharply, their fur bristling at the sight of them. A moment later, however, their fur flattened and their mouths twisted into identical sneers of disdain.

"So, it is true what we've been hearing," a dark brown tabby tom meowed mockingly. "ThunderClan has started taking in outsiders for training."

"Is ThunderClan truly so desperate that they need to resort to the likes of fat, overfed kittypets to strengthen their borders?" a bright ginger molly sneered.

Maplepaw clenched her teeth and hissed furiously, "You're one to talk about taking in outsiders. Everyone knows half your Clan is at least half-kittypet." Her belly churned with rage, and she couldn't resist adding, "Besides, is that your apprentice over there or an overgrown rat that wandered into your camp?"

The dark brown tom stared down at her, his amber eyes flashing coldly. "What do you say we teach these two a little lesson about respect?"

"I'll be ready when you are, Raggedpelt," Foxheart meowed, curling her lip to reveal a row of glittering fangs.

"What do you say?" Raggedpelt asked, turning to look at the two ThunderClan apprentices. "We'll give you one last chance to run, and we never have to speak of this again. But if you refuse...well, let's just hope your Clanmates are able to find every piece of you."

Maplepaw narrowed her eyes and hissed defiantly as Tigerpaw spat back, "Never!"

"Very well, then," Raggedpelt meowed, his eyes flashing. "ShadowClan, attack!"

Tigerpaw barely had time to duck out of the way as Foxheart hurled

herself at him, her claws outstretched and her teeth bared in a snarl. Before she could turn herself around, he pounced on top of the older warrior, raking his claws across her flank. She let out a howl of fury and bit down on his shoulder. It hurt, but Tigerpaw refused to let up, choosing instead to pummel the bright ginger molly's belly with his hind paws. Screeching in pain and rage, Foxheart struggled free of his grasp, turning tail and fleeing across the border into her own territory.

'One down,' Tigerpaw thought in satisfaction.

Glancing around, he saw that Maplepaw was pinning Nightpaw down, her claws scoring again and again over his flank. The ShadowClan apprentice had been training longer than she had, but the former kittypet made for a fierce battler. Her fangs were buried in Nightpaw's shoulder, and she barely seemed to feel the blood dripping down from several wounds across her pelt. Tigerpaw stared in amazement at his denmate as she clawed furiously at Nightpaw.

This has to be her first battle, but she fights like a seasoned warrior. Has she always been this good?

At last, Maplepaw released the ShadowClan apprentice, sending him staggering across the Thunderpath with a warning nip. She got back to her paws again, shaking herself off. Her green eyes were burning with defiance, and she was breathing heavily. Blood dripped from her fur, staining the ground in little droplets.

Now, there was only Raggedpelt left. The ShadowClan deputy stared between the two apprentices, his teeth still bared and his eyes burning with hatred. Tigerpaw padded over to stand beside Maplepaw , blocking Raggedpelt's path to the border. If he wanted to escape, he would have to get through them first. One look at the expression in the ShadowClan warrior's eyes told him that Raggedpelt planned to do exactly that.

"Do you really think you can take on both of us at once?" Maplepaw taunted.

"He looks stupid enough to try," Tigerpaw meowed, feeling a surge

of energy. Raggedpelt was a seasoned warrior, but he was outnumbered. They could easily take him down.

Raggedpelt narrowed his eyes. Hissing in fury, he leaped at Maplepaw, his fangs bared. The calico molly ducked underneath him, scoring her claws over his belly as she passed by. She emerged on the other side, and Tigerpaw took advantage of Raggedpelt's shock to leap onto the older tabby's back. A moment later, however, he found himself being thrown off as Raggedpelt suddenly reared back on his hind legs, sending Tigerpaw flailing through the air. Now free, he turned on Maplepaw, slashing her with his long, powerful front claws. Tigerpaw saw the younger apprentice stumble, but she remained upright, sheathing her claws and jabbing her forepaw into Raggedpelt's eye. The ShadowClan deputy stumbled back, screeching in agony and fury.

At once, Tigerpaw saw his chance. While Raggedpelt was still moaning over his injured eye, he pinned the older warrior on the ground, using his back legs to open a gash in his belly. Before Raggedpelt could summon enough strength to form a counterattack, Tigerpaw leaped off of him, going over to stand beside Maplepaw. Raggedpelt staggered back to his paws, glaring hatefully at the two apprentices. But even he knew when he was beaten. Hissing, he turned tail and half-fled, half-stumbled across the Thunderpath, narrowly missing getting hit by a monster on his way.

"Maplepaw! Tigerpaw!"

Tigerpaw and Maplepaw turned around to see the rest of the patrol racing towards them. They were accompanied by Leopardfoot, Rosetail, and Thrushpelt as well now. Almost immediately, Tigerpaw found himself being smothered by his mother as she tried to lick his wounds, while Bluefur inspected Maplepaw's injuries, her piercing blue eyes filled with worry.

"What happened here?" Adderfang asked. "I thought I just saw Raggedpelt leaving."

"He was," Maplepaw confirmed, wincing as Bluefur accidentally brushed against a wound on her side. "Foxheart and Nightpaw were here too, but we chased them off a while ago."

Bluefur let out a sigh. "When you two didn't come back, we decided to go looking for you. We ran into Rosetail, Thrushpelt, and Leopardfoot when we heard what sounded like fighting. Why didn't you two come back instead of trying to take on the ShadowClan patrol by yourself?"

"I–I thought they would see my fur if we tried to sneak away," Maplepaw admitted. "I don't exactly blend in well, and we got pretty close to them."

"And I'm not going to run away from a fight," Tigerpaw retorted defiantly.

"Get off of it, Bluefur," Thistleclaw snapped, speaking up for the first time since the patrol had arrived. "These two managed to fight off a ShadowClan patrol by themselves. We should be praising them, not giving them a lecture on safety."

"This isn't your place to speak, Thistleclaw," Adderfang snapped at his former apprentice.

"I was only–"

"Enough!" Bluefur lashed her tail. "Honestly, if I knew that coming here was going to start an argument, I'd have gone to find them alone!"

She turned back to the apprentices, calming down slightly. "We are proud of you for defending ThunderClan's territory," she meowed. "But in the future, you should find backup before you try to take on an entire patrol of experienced warriors. You're both good fighters, but you're still just apprentices."

"I understand," Tigerpaw meowed, with Maplepaw echoing his words.

"Good," the blue-furred warrior meowed, helping Maplepaw back to her paws. "Come on, we should collect your prey and then have Goosefeather look at your wounds."

The two apprentices nodded and followed the warriors back through the forest, pausing on occasion to pick up the prey they

had buried before their encounter with Raggedpelt's patrol. As Bluefur bent her head to pick up Maplepaw's rabbit, Tigerpaw glanced over at his denmate. The calico molly's fur was coated with dried blood, and she had clumps of fur missing from her flank. Her entire pelt was covered in dust as well, and it would definitely take a long wash to get all of it out. But despite the exhaustion dulling her normally bright yellow eyes, Tigerpaw didn't think she had ever looked more beautiful.

"Ah young love," Night meowed, "Adorable."

"Nightstar welcome back. How was your half-moon walk?" Frecklewish asked as Nightstar entered the cave.

"Hum..." Nightstar stared at Night, "How is Maplepaw?"

"My kit just left a battle," Night answered.

Maple

Bluefur sat down next to Rosetail as her friend nudged a vole over towards her, watching as Tigerpaw approached Maplepaw. Her apprentice was in the middle of a conversation with Whitepaw, who had been apprenticed to Patchpelt just a few days before. The confidence in Tigerpaw's posture as he tapped the younger apprentice on her shoulder was entirely too familiar to Bluefur, but unlike with Snowfur and Thistleclaw, Maplepaw took her time in answering him. They were too far away for Bluefur to make out what was being said, but judging by the expression on Maplepaw's face, she wasn't at all impressed.

"Is Tigerpaw trying to talk to Maplepaw again?" Rosetail asked, turning her head towards the apprentices.

"Yes, he is," Bluefur confirmed, suppressing a chuckle as Maplepaw flicked her tail dismissively and turned her back on Tigerpaw.

Rosetail shook her head. "He's been padding after her ever since the battle with ShadowClan," she meowed. "And that was two moons ago at least. Poor thing, he doesn't seem to be making much progress, does he?"

Bluefur shook her head. It was obvious to anyone who looked that Tigerpaw was fond of the little calico molly. Even Thistleclaw had noticed, although he merely expressed his disgust at his former apprentice for padding after a kittypet. Every single day, the dark tabby apprentice would approach Maplepaw with an offer to share a piece of fresh-kill or go hunting together, and every single time, she would refuse. Even so, however, he never let her rejections prevent him from trying again the next day. But Maplepaw was just as stubborn as he was, and Bluefur knew that the more Tigerpaw pressed at her, the more determined she would be to refuse him.

"Someone might want to get Tigerpaw away from her," Rosetail commented. "Maplepaw looks like she wants to eat him."

Before Bluefur could respond, she was cut off as Maplepaw suddenly snarled, "Oh, that's it! I have had it up to the stars with you!"

She got up and stormed off towards the gorse tunnel, her calico fur bristling in annoyance. Tigerpaw chased after her, his larger size enabling him to catch up with her in a matter of heartbeats. Bluefur winced to herself; there was no way this was going to end well for him.

"Maplepaw, wait! Where are you going?" he asked.

"That's none of your business," Maplepaw snapped. Bluefur's view of her apprentice was being blocked by Tigerpaw, but she could imagine the smoldering anger in her red eyes. "I don't have to answer to you. If you think I'm up to no good, then feel free to tell my mentor. She is right behind you."

"I never said that," Tigerpaw stammered, taking a step back. "But...can I come with you? I'm sure I can help with whatever you're doing."

Maplepaw let out a long-suffering sigh. "I'm just hunting, Tigerpaw," she meowed irritably. "And I certainly don't need your help. In fact, the only cat around here who needs help is you, but you'll have to talk to Goosefeather or Featherwhisker about that. Now, if you don't mind, I'm leaving now. Don't you dare follow me unless you want to be the Clan's next meal."

With that, she turned around and stalked through the gorse tunnel. Tigerpaw stared after her for a few moments before turning around and padding back in the direction of the apprentices' den, looking extremely downcast. Bluefur felt sorry for him, but she knew that he would bounce back in no time. He always did. If nothing else, his pining and Maplepaw's subsequent rejections had provided the Clan with a great deal of entertainment.

Later that evening, Maplepaw finally returned to the camp with her jaws full of prey. After checking to make sure that Tigerpaw wasn't anywhere in sight, she padded over to the fresh-kill pile and

deposited her load. Once she was done, she went to join Whitepaw, taking a mouse from the pile along with her.

"Hey," the white-furred tom greeted her, his eyes glowing with amusement. "Back from your rage hunt?"

"It wasn't a rage hunt," Maplepaw muttered, taking a bite out of her mouse. "I don't go on rage hunts. It was a perfectly normal hunt, thank you very much."

"Sure," Whitepaw meowed dismissively, flicking her shoulder with his tail. "Well, I don't think anyone else in the Clan will be complaining. You seem to catch half the forest's worth of prey whenever you get worked up like that."

For a moment, Maplepaw considered telling her friend that the reason she hunted so well was that she imagined sinking her claws into Tigerpaw's fur every time she caught a piece of prey. Then she realized how disturbing that sounded, even in her mind. The last thing she wanted was to give Whitepaw nightmares. Deciding to keep silent, she merely flicked her tail and looked away irritably.

"Why do you hate Tigerpaw so much anyway?" Whitepaw asked curiously. "I mean, I know he's arrogant and all, but he's not the worst cat out there."

"I don't hate him," Maplepaw disagreed. "I'm just sick of him bothering me all the time, that's all. It's been two moons, and he still doesn't want to take a hint. And he's never even asked me one question about myself, oh no, it's always 'Maplepaw, guess what? I defeated an entire WindClan patrol on my own,' or 'I just caught a mouse that's big enough to feed three Clans,'. I don't need to hear anything more about how he's the greatest gift StarClan has ever bestowed upon the forest. He probably doesn't even like me; he's only interested in making me worship him the way half the Clan seems to."

Whitepaw didn't speak as the calico molly continued ranting. When she finally paused to take a breath, he meowed, "Well, I don't know if we're talking about the same Tigerpaw, but every time I've spoken to him, he's always going on about how great he thinks you are."

"Probably a different Tigerpaw, then," Maplepaw meowed, taking another bite out of her mouse. "You'll have to introduce me to him sometime. I'd sure like to meet this apparent admirer of mine."

It wasn't as though she hated Tigerpaw; in fact, she wouldn't even say she disliked him. He was a strong fighter, and he wasn't bad-looking either. But Maplepaw was tired of listening to him boast about his accomplishments all the time. She didn't need him to tell her about every single piece of prey he caught or every battle he fought in; she could draw her own conclusions about him herself. However, this was Tigerpaw they were talking about, so it was unlikely that he would ever learn.

"Poor Tigerpaw. He just can't take a hint," Patchkit meowed.

"That tom needs to be told how to impress Maplepaw," Riverstar laughed, "Else she'll rip him in two. At least Thunderclan is entertained."

Tiger

Tigerpaw glanced over at Maplepaw as the calico molly dodged a swipe from Whitepaw, ducking underneath his blow before rearing up to bring her paw crashing down onto his head. There was no question that she was a gifted fighter. Maplepaw was on the smaller side–Whitepaw was as big as she was, even though he was a few moons younger–but what she lacked in size, she more than made up for in aggression. No matter what anyone tried, there was nothing that could be done to intimidate her. The former kittypet's fearlessness was what Tigerpaw loved about her the most.

Yet at the same time, she wasn't needlessly violent or cruel. She never did anything to try to hurt Whitepaw, unlike Thistleclaw, who had encouraged Tigerpaw to attack his son before he was even out of the nursery. Even now, although the gray and white warrior hadn't been his mentor for several moons, he still took every opportunity to berate him for being, in his words, "too soft".

"Tigerpaw! Tigerpaw, are you listening to me?"

Blinking, Tigerpaw realized that Leopardfoot was looking at him with a tired, almost exasperated expression on her face. A few paces away, Maplepaw was staring at him, clearly irritated about something. He glanced between the two mollies in confusion.

"Er–sorry, what?" he asked sheepishly.

"You're supposed to have a training battle with me now," Maplepaw told him. "We've been trying to get your attention, but you were too busy daydreaming."

Tigerpaw felt his face heat up in embarrassment. "Oh, uh, sorry," he mumbled. Maplepaw rolled her eyes but chose not to say anything.

Leopardfoot glanced between the two apprentices, then turned to Bluefur and Patchpelt on the other side of the hollow. "Bluefur, Patchpelt, do you mind continuing this training session without me?

I want to talk to Tigerpaw alone for a few moments."

"Of course," Bluefur agreed, while Tigerpaw suppressed a groan. As if things couldn't get any worse, he was about to get a private scolding–and from his mother, no less. What was Maplepaw going to think of him now?

Feeling utterly defeated, Tigerpaw turned and followed his mother out of the sandy hollow. At the last moment, he glanced back over his shoulder at Maplepaw. The calico molly was talking animatedly with Whitepaw, her yellow eyes sparkling with amusement. He felt a pang at the cheerful expression on her face. She was adorable when she was happy, but he hated the fact that he never got to see that expression directed at him.

Leopardfoot remained silent for quite a while as they padded further away from the training area. Finally, when the two cats had nearly reached Sunningrocks, she turned to him with a serious expression in her eyes.

"Alright," she meowed firmly. "What's going on with you? Ever since you and Maplepaw battled that ShadowClan patrol, you've been completely distracted. I have to shout multiple times to get your attention, and whenever I ask you a question, you give me the wrong answer even when you should already know the correct one. Do you still want to become a warrior?"

"Of course!" Tigerpaw exclaimed, shocked that Leopardfoot would even consider such a thing. He couldn't imagine not becoming a warrior. Not that there was anything wrong with cats who chose not to pursue that path, but he had dreamed of becoming the strongest warrior in the forest ever since Pinestar had left to become a kittypet.

"Then what's the matter?" Leopardfoot asked.

A thousand lies and excuses ran through Tigerpaw's mind. But when he saw the concerned look on his mother's face, they vanished instantly. She knew him too well; there was no way that he would be able to fool her. No matter what he tried, she would see right through him.

"I really like Maplepaw," he confessed. "She's...amazing, and I want to be with her–I mean, once we become warriors. But she doesn't like me at all. Whenever I try to talk to her, she always yells at me or finds some excuse to get away from me. And I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I want her to like me too, but I don't know how to get her to change her mind."

His mother let out a sigh. "Tigerpaw, I know this may be hard to hear, but sometimes there's nothing you can do to get someone to like you. If Maplepaw doesn't feel the same way, there's nothing you can do to change her mind. At the end of the day, it's up to her to decide who she wants to be with."

"I know, Leopardfoot," Tigerpaw protested. "I would never try to force her to be with me. I just don't understand why she acts as if she hates me. I'm strong, and...well, all things considered, I haven't really been that awful to her, have I?"

"Well, perhaps strength isn't what Maplepaw is looking for in a mate," the black-furred queen suggested. "There's more to life than strength or skill in battle, Tigerpaw. And have you actually tried being nice to her? Tell me, what do you talk about when you try to have a conversation with her?"

Tigerpaw thought for a few heartbeats, trying to recall all the conversations he'd had with Maplepaw over the past two moons. He remembered running up to her eagerly, ready to tell her all about the prey he had caught or the border skirmish he had helped fight in. Every single time, all he had wanted to do was impress her. But she didn't see it that way. In her mind, all he was doing was being arrogant and stuck up.

"I...I mean, I usually just talk about something I did," he meowed at last. "If I catch a big piece of prey, I'll tell her about that. Or if I happen to help drive off an enemy patrol, I'll talk to her about that too. And...that's pretty much it."

"Well, there's your problem right there," Leopardfoot replied simply.

Tigerpaw stared blankly at his mother. "What do you mean?"

"Tigerpaw, if you want someone to like you, then you can't only talk about yourself," she told him. "Maplepaw doesn't need you to tell her about every single accomplishment you make; she can form her own judgments for herself. Try having a real conversation with her–ask her questions about herself, get to know her. It doesn't matter what it's about; you can ask her what her favorite piece of fresh-kill is if you want. But you can't make every single thing about yourself if you want to have any chance of her warming up to you."

'I should...talk about her?'

"But...then how am I supposed to impress her?" he asked.

"Don't try to impress her. That's how cats make fools of themselves," Leopardfoot meowed. "Just do what you're supposed to be doing. Train as hard as you can to become the best warrior for your Clan that you can be. Let her take notice of you on her own without forcing everything you do in her face. And whatever you do, if she tells you to leave her alone, then leave her alone. The fastest way to lose a molly's respect is to behave as though you don't respect her wants or needs."

Tigerpaw thought for a few moments. His mother's idea seemed so far-fetched; why would Maplepaw ever take notice of him when she seemed determined to pretend he didn't exist? But at the same time, it wasn't as though he had many other options at this point. Maybe Leopardfoot had a point–maybe he had been going about things the wrong way this whole time.

At any rate, if it got Maplepaw to change her mind about him, it would be well worth it in the end.

"Alright," he agreed finally. "I'll try."

"Leopardfoot to the rescue!" Sqeeked Larchkit.

Laughter echoed around the cave.

Maple

The following day, Maplepaw, Tigerpaw, and Whitepaw were sent on a morning hunting mission. Their job, their mentors told them, was to bring back as much fresh-kill for the Clan by sunhigh as possible. With the approaching cold season on everyone's minds, the entire Clan was taking extra care to ensure that their fresh-kill pile was well stocked.

"But it won't be leaf-bare for another few moons," Whitepaw pointed out.

"Perhaps not, but we can't afford to be caught off guard," Patchpelt meowed. "With leaf-bare comes the threat of greencough, and we've lost several warriors to it in the past. The more we can do to reduce casualties, the better."

"Where should we go?" Maplepaw asked.

"Anywhere you want. Just make sure to bring back as much prey as you can," Bluefur told her.

Maplepaw waited for Tigerpaw to make some sort of remark about how he would be sure to catch more prey than her and Whitepaw combined, but to her surprise, the dark tabby remained silent. She wondered what had gotten into him, then shrugged it off and followed her denmates through the gorse tunnel. There was prey to be caught; Tigerpaw's strange behavior could wait until later.

Together, the three apprentices padded through the forest, each of them staying alert for any sign of wildlife. After a few moments, Maplepaw spotted a mouse lurking in some bushes out of the corner of her eye. Dropping into the hunting crouch, she stalked towards it, making sure to keep her pawsteps light. At the last second, the mouse seemed to realize that something was amiss, but it was too late. The flame-pelted apprentice pounced, killing her prey with one swift bite.

"Nice one!" Tigerpaw and Whitepaw called out to her.

"Thanks, you two," Maplepaw purred. "Just give me a moment to bury this and then we can get going again."

Setting her mouse down, she scraped a bit of dirt over it to protect it from any other wild animals. Once she was finished, she stood up and went to rejoin her denmates.

"Okay," she meowed. "I'm ready to go now."

They continued on their way for several more moments. Maplepaw managed to catch a starling, three more mice, and a thrush. Tigerpaw caught a rabbit, two squirrels, a pigeon, and three blackbirds. Whitepaw caught two mice and a vole. However, when stalking a robin, he accidentally stepped on a twig. The resulting snap alerted the bird to his presence, sending it flying high into a nearby tree. Whitepaw turned to his denmates, clearly dejected.

"Sorry, guys," he meowed apologetically.

"Don't feel bad," Tigerpaw meowed gently. Maplepaw was surprised at how sympathetic he was being. "We've all made that mistake before. You'll get the next one, don't worry."

"I guess," Whitepaw answered, staring down at his paws. "It's just that hunting in front of you two makes me nervous. I don't want to look as if I can't keep up with you guys."

"It doesn't matter if you can't keep up yet. You only just began your training," Maplepaw pointed out. "But if it really makes you that nervous, maybe it would be best if we let you hunt on your own for a bit. We could probably catch more prey for the Clan that way than if we all stuck together in one group."

Her friend perked up immediately. "That sounds great," he meowed, nodding. Turning around, he raced off in the direction of Fourtrees, yowling, "I'll bet I can catch more prey than you two!"

Maplepaw chuckled as she watched Whitepaw disappear from view. Once he was gone, however, she realized that she had just gotten herself into one of her worst nightmares. With Whitepaw on his

own, she was left on a dual hunting mission with Tigerpaw of all cats. One look at the expression on Tigerpaw's face told her the dark tabby was well aware of how awkward the situation was as well.

"So..." Tigerpaw meowed slowly, looking as though he half-expected her to eat him alive right then and there. "Should–should we get going?"

Immediately, Maplepaw wanted to refuse and run away as she had every other time Tigerpaw invited her to do something with him. After all, it wasn't as though she had to hunt with him just because they had originally been in a group. Her sanity would probably thank her later if she chose to refuse his invitation.

Then again, it wasn't as though Tigerpaw had been completely horrible that morning. Indeed, she would almost go as far as to say he had been rather pleasant. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to finish this one mission with him. There were no rules in the warrior code that said she had to hunt with him again if things didn't go well.

"Sure," she agreed finally.

Tigerpaw's eyes lit up. "Great!" he meowed happily. "Want to head towards Sunningrocks, then? There's bound to be a good amount of prey over that way."

Maplepaw nodded, and together, the two apprentices headed off in the direction of the ever-fought over Sunningrocks. They remained mostly silent for a while, only speaking to praise the other for a good catch or to ask about the time. The young molly caught her denmate glancing over at her several times, but he never said a word. Finally, after the fourth or fifth incident, she decided to speak up.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked.

"Oh, er, not really," Tigerpaw meowed, looking rather embarrassed. "This is just a bit more awkward than I expected. I've been wanting the chance to talk to you alone for moons, but now that it's happening, I don't know what to say."

"Is that all?" Maplepaw asked, chuckling. "Never thought you would be the nervous type, Tigerpaw."

Tigerpaw looked away, but not before Maplepaw heard him mutter, "It's only you that's making me nervous."

Pretending not to hear him, she meowed, "You know, if there's something you wanted to ask me, you could just come right out and say so."

"I–I guess," the older apprentice agreed. "Well, uh...what's your favorite piece of fresh-kill?"

"Rabbit," Maplepaw replied promptly. "But then again, everything tastes amazing when you've only ever eaten kittypet food your entire life. I'm pretty sure the Twolegs just collect dried rabbit droppings and call them food, but I've yet to find any solid proof of that."

"You're probably not wrong," Tigerpaw meowed, laughing.

"What about you?" she asked. If he was going to be polite and ask her questions about herself, the least she could do was return the favor. "What's your favorite prey?"

Tigerpaw thought for a few moments, then answered, "Squirrels, probably, or maybe pigeons. Both of them are pretty good."

They continued their small talk as they made their way towards Sunningrocks, pausing whenever one of them came across a potential catch. The longer they talked, the more Maplepaw was surprised to find that she was actually enjoying Tigerpaw's company. When he wasn't bragging about every accomplishment he had ever made, he was actually a decent cat to be around.

It was nearly sunhigh by the time Maplepaw and Tigerpaw reached Sunningrocks. If they were quick, they would be able to catch a few more pieces of fresh-kill before they had to head home. She turned to Tigerpaw to suggest that they hurry up, only to find that her denmate was tasting the air, his eyes narrowed.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"RiverClan scent," Tigerpaw growled.

"It is Sunningrocks," Maplepaw pointed out.

Tigerpaw shook his head. "No, this is fresh scent and it's on our side. There's a RiverClan cat here on our territory. Come on, I want to find out who it is."

Now that she was sniffing the air for herself, Maplepaw realized that he was right. There was the scent of a RiverClan warrior coming from somewhere, but she had been too distracted to notice it before. Cursing herself for her carelessness, she followed Tigerpaw over the rocks, keeping her eyes peeled for any sign of the trespasser.

A moment later, she spotted him. Down near the river, there was a large dark reddish-brown tom. He was stretched out along the edge of the river, the sun illuminating his fur. It was a bit difficult to tell from her angle, but from what Maplepaw could see, it looked as though the warrior was asleep.

In a flash, she and Tigerpaw were racing down the slope to confront the warrior. As they drew closer, Maplepaw realized that he wasn't asleep after all. He sat up slowly, licking his forepaw and drawing it over his face. She felt a surge of fury; how dare this arrogant excuse for a cat bathe on her territory? If he thought he was going to get away with this, he had another think coming.

"Hey, there," the RiverClan warrior meowed calmly, as though he hadn't just been caught trespassing on enemy territory.

Tigerpaw raised his hackles. "What are you doing here?" he spat. "This is our land!"

"Relax, I'm not here to steal any prey," the older tom meowed. "I just felt like sunning myself for a while, and your rocks are perfect for that. My name's Oakheart, by the way."

"No one gives a rat's tail what your name is," Maplepaw snapped. "And we're not going to repeat ourselves again. You're on ThunderClan territory; you don't belong here. Now, do you want to

do this the easy way or the way where we claw your fur off and feed you to the fish?"

"Alright, alright, you made your point," Oakheart meowed, getting back to his paws. He turned around and climbed into the river, swimming across to the opposite bank. "I'll see you around another time," he called over his shoulder.

"What a dream come true," Maplepaw muttered, turning around and walking off. "Come on, let's get back to the camp."

Together, she and Tigerpaw made their way back to the ThunderClan camp, pausing along the way to gather the prey they had caught. By the time they had arrived home, Maplepaw's bad mood had vanished completely. They had assembled enough prey to feed the entire Clan several times over. Hopefully, their mentors would be pleased with what they had managed to gather.

When they padded through the gorse tunnel, Whitepaw was already waiting for them inside. The white tom bounded up to them, his eyes widening when he saw how much prey they had caught.

"Wow," he meowed in amazement. "Did you guys really catch all that?"

"I guess," Maplepaw meowed around the prey clutched in her jaws.

"Well done, you two," Bluefur meowed, striding up to them with Smallear following her. "Take your prey to the fresh-kill pile and then you can both have something to eat. Don't worry about going out again today. Sunstar told us to let you know that you'll both be attending tonight's Gathering."

Maplepaw felt a rush of excitement. She was going to attend her first Gathering! At last, she would finally get to meet more cats from the other Clans–and hopefully ones that were a shade more tolerable than the ones she already knew. Meowing a quick thanks to her mentor, she raced over to the fresh-kill pile and deposited her load. Breathing a sigh of relief, she picked up a small mouse and carried it over to the mossy stump where the apprentices shared their meals.

"Can you believe that?" Tigerpaw asked, sitting down beside her a few moments later. Normally, Maplepaw would have told him to go away, but she was in too good of a mood to be bothered. "We get to go to the Gathering!"

"I know," she purred.

"You'll love it there," her denmate told her. "You'll meet lots of great warriors from all the Clans, and you'll get to see the other Clan leaders."

Maplepaw nodded, then asked, "But why isn't Whitepaw going? He did well today too."

"He's probably still too young," Tigerpaw meowed. "Most apprentices have to wait for a few moons before they're allowed to go to their first Gathering. There are a few special circumstances, of course, but those are usually pretty rare. Besides, it's safer to keep the newer apprentices home."

"Safer? But I thought there was a truce," Maplepaw meowed, puzzled.

"There is, but it doesn't take much for cats to forget about it," Tigerpaw answered. "The elders have told many stories about fights breaking out during Gatherings. Most of the time, StarClan sends clouds to cover the moon before things can escalate too far, but warriors have still been hurt before. Many seasons ago, an old leader of ShadowClan named Ripplestar was killed by StarClan when he led his warriors to attack the other Clans during the full moon."

Somehow, Maplepaw wasn't surprised to hear that a ShadowClan leader had tried to attack the other Clans during a time of peace. They certainly hadn't earned their reputation for being cunning and immoral for nothing.

With a start, she realized that she might see Raggedpelt, Foxheart, and Nightpaw at the Gathering tonight. She felt a pang of apprehension; what would they do if they saw her? Then she shook her head. No matter what they tried, she couldn't afford to look as

though she were afraid of them. She was a ThunderClan cat, for StarClan's sake; she wasn't about to be scared of a few ShadowClan cowards.

All in all, though, it looked as though it was going to be one unforgettable night.

Later that evening, Maplepaw and Tigerpaw bade Whitepaw goodbye as they followed the Gathering patrol through the gorse tunnel. Bluefur had been chosen to attend as well, as had Smallear, Patchpelt, Adderfang, Thrushpelt, Dappletail, Mumblefoot, Goosefeather, and Featherwhisker. Maplepaw brought up the rear with Tigerpaw, glancing up at the darkening sky. There were no clouds to be seen. Hopefully, that was a good sign for the Clans.

When they arrived at Fourtrees, ShadowClan, RiverClan, and WindClan were already there. Maplepaw glanced around the clearing at the throng of cats surrounding her. She didn't recognize any of them, and for a moment, she felt a pang of uncertainty. What was she supposed to say if anyone came and talked to her?

"Relax," Tigerpaw murmured from beside her. "You'll be just fine. Just be civil, don't give away too much about your Clan, and everything will be okay."

"Thanks, Tigerpaw," Maplepaw meowed quietly.

"Well, well. So it is true what they've been saying," a sneering voice meowed. "ThunderClan took in a kittypet for training."

At once, Maplepaw's nervousness vanished and was replaced with anger. "Excuse me?" she asked rudely, turning to the newcomer. It was Hawkheart, the WindClan medicine cat. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm a Clanborn warrior," Hawkheart meowed coolly. "I belong here. You don't. What was ThunderClan thinking, taking in the likes of you? Are they truly that desperate?"

Tigerpaw raised his hackles. "ThunderClan is not desperate!"

"No? Well, you could have fooled me," the WindClan medicine cat replied smoothly.

Maplepaw let out a sigh. "You know what, at the end of the day, thinking that my Clan is desperate for taking me in, that's just you being a typical WindClan cat," she meowed sharply. "I'm not even sure why you're so concerned about it; you have problems in your own Clan that you should be thinking about instead. Maybe try focusing on those instead of getting worked up over matters that don't affect you whatsoever. Anyway, I'll be here long after tonight, and you'll probably be joining the elders soon or dying of cold, judging by the looks of you. Regardless, I'm just getting started on my way to becoming a warrior and your time is finished."

With that, she turned around and walked away with Tigerpaw close behind her. She didn't stop until she was several fox-lengths away from Hawkheart, taking a seat and turning her attention to the Great Rock. Fortunately, the WindClan tom chose to leave her alone, and Maplepaw saw him walking over to sit with the rest of the medicine cats out of the corner of her eye.

"That was great," Tigerpaw meowed, laughing. "You really showed him."

"He deserved it," Maplepaw meowed curtly. "He doesn't get to talk about me just because he thinks he's StarClan's gift to the forest. I'm glad we have Goosefeather and Featherwhisker in our Clan. I think if I had to let Hawkheart treat me, I'd rather die instead."

A yowl sounded from the top of the Great Rock, interrupting their conversation. Maplepaw looked up to see a molly with pinkish-gray fur standing at the edge of the Great Rock. She recognized her from the elders' stories; it was the leader of WindClan, Heatherstar.

"Cats of all Clans, welcome," Heatherstar meowed. "'Tonight, we gather under the full moon for a night of peace and harmony. Cedarstar has informed me that he would like to speak first."

For the rest of the night, Maplepaw listened as the Clan leaders shared various bits of news. Most of it wasn't particularly interesting, so she found herself growing distracted on multiple

occasions. At one point, she spotted Foxheart glaring at her from a few tail-lengths away. Maplepaw rolled her eyes and turned her head back towards the leaders. If Foxheart was going to let herself get worked up over her, that wasn't her problem.

At last, the meeting was called to an end and it was time for the cats to head back to their respective territories. Maplepaw stood up and yawned, following her Clanmates back through the forest. It had been a long night, and she was looking forward to getting some sleep when they arrived back at the camp.

Maple

Maplepaw shook the bundle of moss hooked onto her claw, shivering as the wind chilled her fur. A few tail-lengths away, Tigerpaw was scraping dirt over a mouse he had just caught. His bigger frame and longer fur enabled him to withstand the cold, but Maplepaw felt as though her limbs would freeze off at any moment. Needless to say, she was looking forward to getting back to the camp so she could warm up in her nest.

A quarter moon had passed since the Gathering, bringing the dreaded leaf-bare season. With the beginning of the cold weather came several other hardships as well. Two days ago, ThunderClan had lost Sunningrocks to RiverClan. Their water-loving neighbors had staged an attack in the middle of the night, and despite the efforts of Thistleclaw, Speckletail, and Lionheart, they had been outnumbered and outmatched. Mumblefoot and Weedwhisker had both fallen ill with fevers, and Tawnyspots had started complaining of a persistent bellyache.

The calico molly glanced over the fence that cut off the forest from Twolegplace, letting out a small sigh. She would never dream of going back there, but she would be lying if she said she wasn't at least a little envious of their easygoing lifestyle. They didn't have to worry about their territory being stolen or potentially going hungry; they had everything they could possibly want or need. Briefly, Maplepaw wondered what her littermates were doing at that moment. If she knew them, they were probably curled up in their baskets, enjoying the warmth of a fireplace.

"Are you alright?" Tigerpaw asked, walking over to her.

Maplepaw shook herself off. "I'm fine," she replied, tearing her gaze away from the border. "Just thinking, that's all."

"About your family?" the dark tabby guessed.

"Sort of," Maplepaw answered, flicking her tail. "It's been a while

since I've seen any of them, and I guess I was just wondering what they were up to."

"Do you miss them?" Tigerpaw asked curiously.

"Great StarClan, no," Maplepaw exclaimed. If there was one thing she definitely didn't miss about Twolegplace, it was her family. Well, she missed Night, but she was dead. She had never known her father, and she couldn't care less about Apple and Reed, who had bullied her ever since they were kits. "I would never miss those cats. Especially not Apple and Reed."

Tigerpaw nodded, then meowed, "You know, I've known you for almost three moons, but I still haven't heard much about your family except for everything that happened between you and your littermates." He paused for a moment, looking as though he were unsure what to say next.

Maplepaw nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"Well...I was just wondering, why did they treat you the way they did?" he finished.

"Honestly, I don't know," Maplepaw admitted. It was a question she'd been asking herself for moons. "They've always had something against me, but I never figured out what it was. Maybe it was the fact that I never liked to play their games, maybe it had something to do with my interest in the forest. Most of the kittypets in Twolegplace hate forest cats because they think they're savage, heartless, and unfeeling. Socks and Ruby...weren't exactly an exception."

"They didn't hurt you, did they?" Tigerpaw asked anxiously. Maplepaw wondered why he cared so much. It wasn't as though it was his problem, was it?

"No," she answered honestly. "Well, not physically at least. But they made sure to mock me at every opportunity, calling me a freak for being interested in the forest and saying that I was just as savage and heartless as a wild cat. My mother usually tried to put a stop to it, but they would be right back at it as soon as her back was

turned."

"I'm sorry," Tigerpaw meowed softly.

Maplepaw twitched her ear. "It doesn't matter. I'm probably never going to see either of them again anyway," she meowed indifferently. "Anyway, what about your family? I don't think you've talked much about them either. I mean, I know Leopardfoot's your mother, but what about your father or your brothers and sisters?"

At the question, Tigerpaw's gaze darkened and he looked away. He remained silent for several heartbeats as he stared at his paws, his expression full of pain and resentment.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked," Maplepaw backtracked hastily. "Don't worry about it, you don't have to tell me anything."

"No, it's alright," he spoke up. "It's not your fault. I didn't really know my sisters, but that's because they died when we were still less than a moon old. And my father, well...he left to become a kittypet when I was young as well."

"Why?" Maplepaw asked, shocked. Judging by the way her Clanmates talked about kittypets, she couldn't imagine any of them wanting to leave ThunderClan in favor of that lifestyle.

Tigerpaw shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted. "He said it was because he wanted to spend his final life in peace, but I doubt that's the real reason. I mean, he could have just retired to the elders' den if he wanted to relax. But he chose to abandon his Clan instead. And, well–I mean, I don't have any proof of this–but I've always kind of thought that there was someone else, you know? That perhaps the reason he left was that he had another mate and kits in Twolegplace, and he wanted to be with them more than with Leopardfoot and me."

Maplepaw felt a pang of sympathy. Her father had left her as well, but she had never known him to begin with, so his absence didn't bother her. But Tigerpaw was clearly still hurt by his father's abandonment. She had to admit that his theory of his father having another family made sense, even as awful as it sounded. Without

thinking, Maplepaw licked his shoulder comfortingly.

"I'm so sorry," she meowed softly.

"It's alright," Tigerpaw murmured. "Come on, we should probably head back to the camp."

The two apprentices gathered up their prey and moss before heading back in the direction of the ThunderClan camp. Along the way, Tigerpaw kept bumping into Maplepaw, brushing his pelt against hers at seemingly every turn. It was happening a bit too often to be entirely accidental, but she decided not to say anything. Tigerpaw's strange behavior towards her was something she didn't feel like working out at the moment.

Over the past quarter moon, she had gotten to know him better than she had ever expected. Their relationship had improved to the point where Maplepaw was almost willing to consider Tigerpaw her friend. However, she couldn't help but feel as though he wanted something else from her, and it frustrated her to no end since she had no idea what that could be or if her assumptions were even right.
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"Speaking of Reed and Apple, where are they?" Asked Night.

"Worry not. They are alive," responded Oakstar.

Tiger

A few days later, Tigerpaw awoke to the sound of coughing coming from somewhere to his left. Yawning, he turned his head to see the smaller form of Maplepaw convulsing as she coughed and gasped for air, breathing heavily as though she were overheated. Her eyes were closed, but they were shut too tightly for her to have been asleep, and her expression was contorted with pain.

In a flash, Tigerpaw was out of his nest and rushing across the camp to the medicine den. He didn't know what was wrong with Maplepaw, but he knew that she needed Goosefeather and Featherwhisker's help. Tigerpaw shoved his way into the medicine clearing, where the two medicine cats were already sorting herbs. They looked up as he entered, clearly startled by his sudden appearance.

"Tigerpaw?" Featherwhisker asked in concern. "What's the matter?"

"There's something wrong with Maplepaw," Tigerpaw meowed urgently. "I think she might be sick. I just woke up, and I heard her coughing."

Goosefeather nodded and raced back across the camp to the apprentices' den with Featherwhisker following close behind. Tigerpaw bounded after them, his heart beating rapidly against his chest. He tried to calm himself down, telling himself that this was Maplepaw, the strongest cat he knew. She could pull through anything; she would be just fine. But then he remembered how weak she had seemed, and his fear increased tenfold. If he lost her, he didn't know what he would do.

When he arrived back at the apprentices' den, Goosefeather was already examining Maplepaw. There was a grim look on the old gray tom's face, and Tigerpaw felt his heart sink. Whatever was going on with the pretty calico molly, he knew it wasn't good news.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked worriedly.

Goosefeather closed his eyes. "She has greencough," he replied grimly. "Featherwhisker, help me take her back to my den. I have some catmint I can give Maplepaw to help her cough. Someone will need to let Bluefur know that she won't be able to train for at least a few days."

Tigerpaw stood frozen as the two medicine cats lifted Maplepaw up and carried her to their den. He could hear Whitepaw stirring in his nest as the younger apprentice woke up, but he didn't pay him any mind. Maplepaw had greencough. She had greencough, and from what he knew of that illness, she could very well be on her way to StarClan. Without thinking, he rushed after Goosefeather and Featherwhisker, barging into the fern-covered clearing and running over to Maplepaw . The calico molly blinked tiredly at the sight of him, then went into yet another coughing fit.

"What do you think you're doing?" Goosefeather snapped at him. "Have you gone completely mouse-brained? In case you didn't realize, Maplepaw is contagious right now! Do you want to get infected as well?"

"I don't care!" Tigerpaw snapped back. He knew he was being rude, but he couldn't be bothered with decorum at the moment. "I'm not going to leave her."

"I know you're worried about her," Featherwhisker meowed, a bit more kindly than his mentor. "But we can't risk both of you getting sick. The last thing we want is for Maplepaw's illness to spread to the rest of the Clan."

Tigerpaw shook his head. "But–"

"Tigerpaw." At the sound of the weak, raspy voice, he turned his head to Maplepaw. His denmate was looking at him with pleading green eyes. "Just do as they say, please. I'll be fine. Goosefeather and Featherwhisker will take care of me; they won't let me die."

His first instinct was to refuse. Why would he leave her when she was obviously in pain? If he was going to lose her, he wanted to be there when it happened. But when Tigerpaw met Maplepaw's gaze, he found that he couldn't say no to her.

"Alright," he agreed reluctantly.

"Thank you," Maplepaw murmured before breaking into another coughing episode. When she was able to speak again, she rasped, "Just–do me one favor, will you? Tell Bluefur what's happened."

Tigerpaw nodded and walked out of the medicine den, casting one last look over his shoulder at the calico apprentice as he padded through the fern-covered clearing. Of course, he knew that Goosefeather and Featherwhisker wouldn't rest until she had been cured. Seeing how weak she appeared, however, made it difficult to feel optimistic.

Bluefur was already awake and sharing a vole with Rosetail when Tigerpaw emerged from the medicine den. She looked up as he approached, her blue eyes questioning when she saw the bleak expression on his face.

"What's happened?" the blue-gray molly asked.

"Maplepaw won't be able to train for a while," Tigerpaw reported.

Bluefur's eyes widened in alarm. "Why not?"

"She has greencough," he told her weakly. "I think it must have come down sometime last night because I woke up to her coughing. Goosefeather and Featherwhisker are treating her now, but they don't want any visitors since they want to keep it from spreading."

The blue-gray warrior let out a sigh. "Thank you, Tigerpaw," she murmured, her eyes downcast and sad. "Leopardfoot should be awake shortly, and then she'll take you out. We were supposed to join you for training today, but it looks as if that won't be happening. Will you let her know that I'll be staying here to make sure that Maplepaw is alright?"

"Okay," Tigerpaw agreed, nodding.

"I'll tell Sunstar not to put you on any patrols today," Rosetail meowed, getting to her paws. Bluefur nodded gratefully, and the ginger-tailed warrior bounded over to Sunstar's den beneath the Highrock.

Tigerpaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile but changed his mind at the last second and veered away. After everything that had happened so far that morning, he wasn't feeling particularly hungry. Indeed, he wasn't sure whether he would feel hungry ever again, or at least not until Maplepaw recovered from her illness. Why couldn't he have gotten sick instead of her? Better yet, why couldn't Thistleclaw have gotten sick instead of her? It wasn't fair that the most amazing cat in the entire forest was lying in the medicine den, coughing and twitching in pain while cats who deserved far worse were still perfectly happy and healthy.

Well, he supposed that Thistleclaw couldn't exactly be described as happy, but he was certainly healthy at the very least.

What if Maplepaw did end up dying from greencough? Tigerpaw didn't know what he would do then. He wasn't foolish enough to think that he couldn't live without her–he knew that in the end, he would be able to move on. Everyone got over things at some point. But the thought of not being able to see her bright yellow eyes or hear her voice as she delivered another sassy, clever remark hit him like a punch in the gut.

He shook his head in despair. Of course, he knew that life wasn't fair. That fact had been proven to him long ago when Pinestar left him and Leopardfoot to become a kittypet. Yet Tigerpaw couldn't help feeling as though, for once at least, he deserved to have a little good fortune.

"W-will she die?" Petalkit whispered.

"No," stated Oakstar, "Goosefeather and Featherwhisker are good healers."

"Snowfur, please go to her," Night asked a white cat .

Maple

When Maplepaw opened her eyes next, she was lying in a warm, sunny field with star-like particles scattered around her. Confused, she climbed to her paws and looked around at her surroundings. As she did so, however, she only became increasingly bewildered. There was something oddly comforting, almost familiar, about this place, but she was certain that she had never come across this particular field anywhere in ThunderClan territory.

"Hello there, little one," a soft voice purred. "I've been waiting a long time to meet you."

Maplepaw spun around to see a large white molly with gray-tipped ears about the same size as Bluefur walking towards her. The newcomer's eyes were the exact same shape and color as her mentor's as well, and her pelt sparkled with starlight. She stared in confusion. There was definitely ThunderClan scent on this cat, but Maplepaw had never seen her before.

"Who–who are you?" she asked hesitantly.

"My name is Snowfur," the white-furred molly introduced herself. "I was once a warrior of ThunderClan myself until I was killed on the Thunderpath chasing off a ShadowClan patrol."

Maplepaw nodded, then paused as everything that Snowfur had said finally sank in. "Wait, so...does that mean you're dead?"

Snowfur nodded.

"Then...I'm dead too?" Maplepaw guessed.

Snowfur shook her head. "No," she meowed gently. "You're still very much alive. But your body has been weakened severely by greencough, so you're sort of in an in-between state right now. You'll be able to wake up once you've recovered some of your strength."

Maplepaw let out a sigh. She didn't particularly like the idea of having to stay in this unfamiliar territory, but it didn't seem as though she had much choice. On the bright side, at least it was better than being stuck in ShadowClan territory. Not that she had any idea what it was like there, of course, but she could guess that it was less than pleasant.

"Are you and Bluefur related?" Maplepaw asked curiously, deciding that it would be best to find some way to pass the time. "You look kind of like her except for your pelt color."

"We are, indeed. Very clever," Snowfur purred. "Bluefur was–is–my sister. Stormtail is our father and our mother, Moonflower, is here in StarClan as well. She wasn't able to come to meet you today, but she'll be here when it's your turn to join our ranks for good. And you already know my son, Whitepaw."

The calico molly purred at the mention of her friend. "He's great," she meowed enthusiastically. "Lots of fun and already a really good fighter."

"I'm glad to hear it," Snowfur meowed softly. "I worried that, after I died, his father would have too much of an influence on him. But I'm glad that Bluefur and Smallear have done such a good job of training him."

"His father?" Maplepaw echoed, puzzled. Then she remembered the familiar shape and color of Whitepaw's eyes, the frame that hinted to the large build he would have one day, and most importantly, the strange remark by Goosefeather on her first day in ThunderClan. "You don't mean...not Thistleclaw?"

Her white-furred companion nodded. "We were close as apprentices, but of course, we weren't allowed to become mates then, so we waited until we had earned our warrior names," she told Firepaw. "Thistleclaw was arrogant, extremely arrogant, even before he left the nursery. But that was what I liked about him–the confidence that he was the best, although Bluefur didn't see it that way. I had Whitepaw a few moons after we became mates, and Thistleclaw looked so proud when he saw his son for the first time. For a while, I thought we were going to have a family together. But then..."

She trailed off and Maplepaw prompted, "But then, what?"

Snowfur let out a sigh. "But then I died," she went on. "And Thistleclaw changed. Or perhaps I was just finally able to see what sort of cat he really was, I don't really know myself. But either way, he wasn't the same cat I fell in love with. He was cruel, violent, and bloodthirsty, with a grudge against Bluefur that he refused to let go of. They had never gotten along–which I'm sure you already know–but it became worse after my death."

"I'm sorry," Maplepaw meowed sympathetically.

"Nothing to be sorry about," Snowfur replied. "Thistleclaw will face his judgment in time. But for now, it's time for you to wake up. Your body has mostly recovered, although you should stay in the medicine den for another day or so before you return to your own nest. It was a pleasure meeting you, Maplepaw."

Maplepaw opened her mouth to respond, but Snowfur was already gone. The strange meadow vanished before her eyes and was replaced by the familiar sights and smells of the ThunderClan medicine den. She yawned and stretched slightly, sitting up in her makeshift nest and drawing her forepaw over her face. Her body still felt a little weaker than usual, but she had to admit she was feeling much better. At the very least, she could breathe without coughing every other heartbeat again.

"Welcome back, Maplepaw," Featherwhisker meowed, stepping out from the back of the medicine store with a bundle of herbs in his jaws. "You've been out for quite a while. It's good to see you awake again."

"Thanks, Featherwhisker," Maplepaw yawned. "How long have I been asleep for anyway?"

"About three days now," the medicine cat apprentice answered. "I daresay Tigerpaw will be happy to see you awake. He should be on his way to visit soon; he's been here every day since you fell ill."

As if on cue, at that moment, the ferns rustled and Tigerpaw emerged with a squirrel clutched in his jaws. He scanned the

medicine den, freezing in shock when he saw Maplepaw sitting up in her nest. A moment later, however, his amber eyes lit up with joy and he rushed over to her, dropping his squirrel near the entrance to the cave.

"You're awake," he purred with relief, his eyes shining with happiness.

"Of course," Maplepaw replied haughtily. Then, deciding to have a little fun, she narrowed her eyes and asked, "Why, did you think I was going to die or something? You thought a little cough would be enough to do me in?"

Tigerpaw backed away, his dark tabby fur fluffing up nervously. "N-not at all! I had complete faith in you!"

Maplepaw, now struggling to keep a straight face, lifted her chin into the air and meowed, "Good. I have taught you well, my fine underling. Always remember the golden rule. I control my fate. StarClan does not control it for me. And if they try to claim they do, they'll have me to answer to. I have a punishment for them that's worse than anything they could possibly imagine. Worse than being forced to clean the elders' den for six moons, worse than border patrols with Thistleclaw, even worse than having to guard the ShadowClan border."

Tigerpaw listened, his eyes wide.

"If anyone in StarClan dares defy me," Maplepaw continued, still in the same mock-haughty voice. "They will be forced to wear a pink kittypet bow for the rest of their afterlives."

For a moment, the two apprentices stared at each other silently. Then, finally, Maplepaw couldn't hold herself together anymore and started laughing. Tigerpaw joined in a moment later, and for a while, the only sound that could be heard from the medicine den was the raucous merriment of the two friends.

"You're pretty when you're happy," Tigerpaw murmured once they had calmed down.

"What did you say?" Maplepaw asked, certain she'd heard him wrong.

Tigerpaw turned his head away slightly. "Er, never mind," he meowed hastily. "Look, I brought this squirrel. You should eat something before Goosefeather wakes up and takes the entire fresh-kill pile for himself."

Maplepaw stared in confusion as Tigerpaw quickly grabbed the squirrel and dropped it in front of her, his dark tabby fur fluffed up in embarrassment. What could she have asked that would get him so worked up? She pondered the question for a moment, then decided that it would be best to worry about it later. Tigerpaw's behavior was still just as much a mystery as it had ever been, and she didn't have the energy or the will to work out the reason behind it at the moment.

Maple

After another day had passed, Goosefeather and Featherwhisker finally deemed Maplepaw healthy enough to be allowed to return to her regular apprentice duties. They cautioned her against exerting herself too much for a few days, but the young molly didn't care; she was too excited about finally being able to leave the medicine den. She didn't even mind when Tigerpaw insisted on bringing her food and helping her groom her pelt, although normally she would have snapped at him for treating her like a kit.

"You're in an unusually good mood today," the dark tabby noted.

"It's a nice day," Maplepaw replied cheerfully. She waved her tail at Whitepaw, who was returning to the camp after what looked to be a successful battle session with Patchpelt. The white apprentice nodded back at her before going to pick out a robin from the fresh-kill pile, clearly exhausted.

Unfortunately, her good mood wouldn't last much longer. Once he had finished his meal, Tigerpaw excused himself to go clear out the elders' old bedding. Not even two heartbeats after he left, Thistleclaw saw fit to approach her, his usual look of disdain on his face. Maplepaw groaned inwardly; while Tigerpaw could be annoying at times, she would gladly take him over Thistleclaw any day. She lowered her gaze and chewed her mouse slowly, hoping to discourage him from trying to strike up any sort of conversation with her.

"I see you're out of Goosefeather's den now, kittypet," the gray and white warrior growled.

No such luck.

Letting out a sigh, Maplepaw swallowed her last mouthful and turned her topaz-yellow eyes upwards so that she was looking directly at the older warrior. "And why, might I ask, is that of any concern to you?"

"It isn't," Thistleclaw retorted coolly.

"Well, you obviously had a reason for coming over here and talking to the lowly kittypet apprentice, so you might as well just spit it out," Maplepaw meowed irritably. "And make it quick, if you don't mind. I have better things to do than to sit around listening to anything you have to say to me."

For a moment, she thought the spiky-furred warrior was going to slash her open with his claws. He growled at her and lashed his tail, his teeth bared in a snarl. After a few heartbeats, however, he managed to calm himself down. Maplepaw suspected that having so many other cats around helped him control his temper a little–after all, considering how few cats trusted Thistleclaw these days, it wouldn't do him any good to get in even more trouble.

"I want you to stay away from Tigerpaw," Thistleclaw hissed at her. "A stupid, pathetic kittypet like you doesn't have any right to even speak to my apprentice. He deserves a real warrior, not some soft, overfed waste of fresh-kill."

This time, Maplepaw laughed out loud. "Your apprentice?" the calico molly repeated incredulously. "Pardon me, Thistleclaw, but the last time I checked, Leopardfoot was Tigerpaw's mentor, not you."

"That will be remedied soon enough," the older warrior replied, swiping his tongue around his jaws as though he had just finished eating a juicy piece of prey. "Once Sunstar sees that I'm the best cat to be mentoring Tigerpaw, I'll have my apprentice back in no time. And once that happens, I'll see to it that you never go near him again."

Maplepaw considered telling him that Tigerpaw was the one who approached her all the time but decided it wasn't worth it. "I hate to break it to you, but it's not up to you to decide whether I talk to my denmates or not. You might think that you're the greatest warrior to ever walk the forest, Thistleclaw, but you're really just a vain, arrogant, selfish, conceited, bloodthirsty, heartless excuse for a cat who would probably murder his own family if it meant you could get what you want. I feel sorry for anyone who has to put up with

you, and I especially feel sorry for Whitepaw. Imagine having you as a father. I think I'd die of the shame."

Thistleclaw lashed his tail, digging his claws into the ground. "Let's get one thing straight," he snarled. "You will never be a true warrior. I don't care what Sunstar or anyone else says. Only cats who were born in the wild can call themselves real warriors. You're weak and pathetic, and you always will be. So don't even think about bothering Tigerpaw again after I get him back as my apprentice. Your paths are different, and I can't have him being distracted by you. He's going to become one of the greatest warriors the forest has ever seen, and your only job, Maplepaw, is to produce more kits for the Clan. Since you won't ever be useful as a hunter or a fighter, you might as well make yourself useful."

"Excuse me?" Maplepaw narrowed her eyes angrily. "What did you just say to me?"

"I said–"

"That was a rhetorical question, stupid," she snapped, cutting off the gray and white tom before he could get any further. "And let me make one thing clear. I don't know who you think you are, but you don't get to decide what my 'job' in the Clan is. If I want to have kits when I'm older, I'll be the one making that decision. I don't need anyone else to dictate my life for me, and even if I did, I certainly wouldn't be asking you of all cats. But it's fine, I appreciate the sentiment. At least I have a purpose in this Clan, unlike you. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to see if Bluefur will take me hunting or on a border patrol before I lose any more of my sanity from having to listen to your voice."

Without waiting for a response, Maplepaw stood up and stalked across the camp to where Bluefur, Rosetail, and Leopardfoot were sharing a meal. The three mollies looked up as she approached, their eyes softening with a mixture of sympathy and amusement when they saw the agitated state she was in. Maplepaw felt like snapping at them; was now really the time to laugh at her?

"Something going on between you and Thistleclaw over there?" Bluefur asked sympathetically.

"You could say that," Maplepaw grunted, sitting down beside her mentor. "For some reason, the idiot thought it would be a good idea to tell me that I'm not allowed to talk to Tigerpaw anymore because, according to him, I'm not good enough for the great future of ThunderClan. Ha! As if I'd listen to anything he has to say. And he actually tried to tell me that my purpose in the Clan is to produce kits! Can you believe that?"

Rosetail let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, Maplepaw," the gray tabby warrior apologized. "He's always been that way, even when we were kits. I think Poppydawn hoped that he would grow up and change eventually, but that never happened."

"He did the same thing to Snowfur too, now that I think about it," Leopardfoot remarked. "Not in the same way, mind you, he made sure to be a little more...subtle about it."

"How so?" Maplepaw asked curiously. She couldn't imagine Thistleclaw being subtle about anything. Then again, if Sunstar had once trusted him enough to mentor an apprentice, she supposed he had to be a fairly good actor. Of course, they all knew how that had turned out.

Bluefur narrowed her eyes. "He was always going on about what a good mother she would be and how wonderful it would be to have kits with her," the blue-furred molly meowed bitterly. "I used to have to listen to them all the time...talking about how they were going to have a happy family and how their kits would be the greatest gift ThunderClan had ever received. Snowfur always used to be a fighter–you remind me a lot of her in a way, as a matter of fact–and I never thought that she would be the type of cat to settle down in the nursery and start a family. But Thistleclaw changed that in her, and before I knew it, she was expecting his kits. And we hadn't even been warriors for much time either."

The blue-gray warrior's eyes darkened suddenly. "She gave birth to Whitepaw and she did a wonderful job raising him, but being cooped up in the nursery all the time made her restless," she continued. "I offered to take her out on a walk, and while we were out, we ended up getting into an argument. She ran away and I chased after her, but we bumped into a ShadowClan patrol. We

managed to fight them off, but Snowfur was so frustrated with being stuck in the nursery for so long that she tried to chase them across the Thunderpath... and she was killed by a monster. If Thistleclaw hadn't put the idea in her head that she needed to have kits with him, she wouldn't have been stuck in camp all the time, and she would have had the common sense not to rush onto the Thunderpath the way she did. It's his fault that my sister died."

Maplepaw didn't know what to say to that. For a moment, she wondered if she should tell Bluefur what she had learned from her meeting with Snowfur: that the white queen had loved Thistleclaw and wanted to have a family with him. But she decided against it, figuring there wasn't much point in doing so. It was hard to disagree with her mentor's perspective anyway; Thistleclaw did seem like the type of cat to manipulate his mate into having kits with him. Silently, she licked Bluefur's shoulder to comfort her and felt the older warrior brush her muzzle against her forehead gratefully.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be saying things like that," Bluefur murmured. "Their relationship wasn't entirely awful. Whitepaw makes the fact that I don't have Snowfur around anymore much easier to bear."

"You're not entirely wrong," Leopardfoot meowed, flicking her tail. "I still have no idea what Snowfur saw in Thistleclaw. Even though we didn't always know he was bloodthirsty, he's never exactly been the nicest cat."

"StarClan knows, I'm sure," Bluefur replied resignedly. Shaking her head, she turned her attention to Maplepaw. "Now, I'm guessing you didn't come over here to gossip about Snowfur and Thistleclaw, so is there anything you needed?"

"What–oh! Yeah, actually, I was just wondering if we could go hunting," Maplepaw answered, twitching her ear.

"Of course," her mentor meowed kindly. "Rosetail, Leopardfoot, do you two want to come? We should try to restock the fresh-kill pile by tonight."

"I can't, I promised Swiftbreeze and Robinwing that I would look

after the kits this afternoon," Leopardfoot meowed apologetically. "But maybe next time."

"I'll come with you," Rosetail spoke up. "I could do with some exercise after that meal. Maybe we could ask Thrushpelt and Tigerpaw to come; I'm sure they'd love to keep you two company."

"Right," Bluefur mumbled, averting her icy blue eyes towards the ground. Maplepaw wondered why her mentor was looking so mutinous at the mention of Thrushpelt's name; from what she could see, they got along well. Then the last part of Rosetail's sentence finally registered in her brain and she snapped her head back to the ginger-tailed molly.

"Wait, why would Tigerpaw be happy to keep us company?" she asked.

At her question, the three older warriors exchanged an amused glance and shook their heads. "You'll understand in time, dear," Rosetail replied finally. "In the meantime, why don't you go see if Tigerpaw wants to join our hunting patrol? I'm sure he'll be flattered if you ask him."

"If you say so..." Maplepaw still wasn't sure what was going on, but she dipped her head obediently and padded over to the elders' den. Tigerpaw was just coming out as she approached, and he paused when he noticed her coming.

"Hey, Maplepaw," he greeted her. "You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm great, actually. We're just about to go hunting and I was wondering if you wanted to come," Maplepaw told him. "Bluefur, Rosetail, Thrushpelt, and I are all going."

"Well, if you're going to be there, I can't say no," Tigerpaw meowed softly.

"Well, thank you for the compliment. That's unusually nice of you," Maplepaw meowed with a chuckle. She turned around and started walking back over to the warriors, who were waiting for them by the gorse tunnel. "Come on, we should get going. I'll bet I can catch

more prey than you!"

Tigerpaw purred. "That's what you think," he teased, bounding after her. "I'll catch so much prey, the entire Clan will be able to feast for two moons."

"I'm sure the Clan would appreciate it," Thrushpelt meowed in amusement. "Why don't you and Maplepaw go off on your own? We'll meet you two at Fourtrees before we head back to the camp."

"O-okay," Tigerpaw stammered, looking unusually embarrassed. He glanced over at Maplepaw awkwardly. "So...er, do you want to go hunting together?"

"Sure," Maplepaw agreed cheerfully, flicking her tail. She darted off into the forest, calling over her shoulder, "I'm going to catch the first piece of prey!"

As she raced through the forest, she could hear Tigerpaw several tail-lengths behind as he struggled to catch up with her. Maplepaw didn't stop to wait, however, choosing instead to dart up a nearby tree and scan the forest for any sign of prey. It had been a long stay in the medicine den, and she was going to make sure to make the most of this little hunting trip.

Maple

Maplepaw ducked out of the way as Bluefur leaped at her, twisting around and using her back legs to fling her mentor across the sandy hollow. Before the blue-gray molly had time to perform a counterattack, she leaped to her paws again, her senses on high alert. Finally, after what felt like endless seasons of training, she was almost ready to become a warrior. All she had to do was pass one final battle assessment, and she would be having her warrior ceremony later that evening.

Out of the corner of her eye, Maplepaw could see Whitepaw and Patchpelt watching her intently. The younger apprentice had passed his final assessment as well and was now waiting to see if Maplepaw would be joining him as a warrior tonight. Truthfully, Maplepaw knew she could have earned her warrior name at least two moons ago, but she had chosen to delay her ceremony until Frostpaw and Brindlepaw had become apprentices so that Whitepaw wouldn't be alone.

"That's enough for today," Bluefur panted as Maplepaw landed a successful upright lock.

"Does that mean I passed?" Maplepaw asked, climbing off her mentor and allowing her to get back to her paws.

"You did," the blue-gray molly purred, touching her nose to Maplepaw's ear. "Well done, Maplepaw."

Maplepaw let out a sigh of relief that she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. Quickly, she bounded over to Whitepaw, who was practically bouncing up and down at the edge of the clearing in excitement. When she reached him, he licked her shoulder in congratulations, although he had to bend his head down to do so. Over the past few moons, he had surpassed her in size and could even rival Tigerclaw in that department now. Maplepaw was glad that they were on her side; she wouldn't want to meet either of them in battle.

"We did it!" Whitepaw purred, his yellow eyes shining with excitement. "We're going to become warriors!"

"You both did wonderfully today," Patchpelt meowed warmly. "Let's get back to the camp so you two can have something to eat, and then Bluefur and I will talk to Sunstar about holding your warrior ceremonies."

The two apprentices nodded eagerly and raced off in the direction of the camp. Despite having just spent most of the afternoon in a long, grueling battle session, Maplepaw's paws felt lighter than air as she padded over to the fresh-kill pile. Not even the sight of Thistleclaw standing at the edge of the camp, yellow eyes narrowed in hatred, could dampen her joy at having passed her assessment. She selected a rabbit–it was rather stringy, but it would do–and was about to carry it over to the mossy stump outside the apprentices' den when she heard Tigerclaw calling out to her.

"How did your assessment go?" the dark tabby asked, padding over to her. He had earned his warrior name three moons ago, not long after Maplepaw had recovered from her bout of greencough. A few tail-lengths away, Whitepaw put his robin down to answer.

"We passed," he replied. Tigerclaw's eyes lit up.

"You did? That's great!" he purred. Maplepaw couldn't help noticing that although he praised both of them equally, he didn't turn to look at Whitepaw once. "I knew you could do it."

"Thanks, Tigerclaw," Maplepaw meowed sincerely. "Listen, we're supposed to eat right now, but we'll see you after the ceremony."

"Alright," Tigerclaw agreed, stepping aside and allowing her to walk past. As Maplepaw padded towards the mossy stump, he called out to her, "I'll be sure to make a nest in the warriors' den for you!"

Maplepaw flicked her tail to let him know that she'd heard and sat down beside the apprentices' eating area, taking a bite out of her rabbit. As she chewed her fresh-kill, she suddenly realized that Whitepaw was looking at her with amusement clear in his eyes. She cocked her head to the side questioningly, but he just shook his

head and chuckled.

"What is it?" she asked, puzzled and more than a little irritated.

"Oh, nothing," Whitepaw meowed, twitching his whiskers. "You'll understand in a few more moons, I'm sure."

"Yeah, that's what Rosetail, Bluefur, and Leopardfoot keep telling me," Maplepaw muttered. "I don't suppose it would occur to any of you to actually tell me what's so funny."

"Ah, but where would we get our entertainment from then?"

"I'm honored beyond belief that you find my suffering so amusing, believe me."

"Sarcastic as ever, Maplepaw."

"Infuriating as ever, Whitepaw."

The calico apprentice let out a sigh as she finished off the rest of her meal. She was beginning to realize that she would probably never understand what her friends found so hilarious about her and Tigerclaw. They were friends now, granted, but she didn't see why that was cause for amusement. If there was anything funny about the situation, it was that she was now gifted with the opportunity to see Thistleclaw practically choke with horror every time Tigerclaw so much as looked at her. She would gladly enjoy the gray and white warrior's suffering any day.

It occurred to Maplepaw that she should probably be careful what she wished for.

Finally, as the sun was just beginning to dip down below the horizon, Sunstar gave the call to summon the Clan for a meeting. Her heart beating rapidly in her chest, Maplepaw stood up and padded over to the throng of warriors beneath the Highrock. This was it; this was the big moment. Any moment now, she would lose her status as an apprentice forever and take her place among the warriors of ThunderClan.

"Today we welcome two new apprentices into our ranks as warriors," Sunstar began once everyone had settled themselves down. "Maplepaw and Whitepaw have finished their training, and it is my honor to grant them their warrior names this evening. Whitepaw, please step forward."

Whitepaw padded forward, his body trembling with excitement. Sunstar looked down at the younger tom.

"Whitepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" the ThunderClan leader asked.

There was no hesitation in Whitepaw's voice. "I do," he replied.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Whitepaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Whitestorm. StarClan honors your bravery and your wisdom, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Sunstar leaped down from the Highrock and touched his muzzle to Whitestorm's head. The newly-named warrior licked his shoulder respectfully, stepping back and padding over to join Bluefur and Rosetail near the center of the group of cats. They purred softly in congratulations, although Maplepaw noticed that Thistleclaw made no move to acknowledge his son.

Now, it was Maplepaw's turn. Once the Clan was paying attention again, Sunstar turned his attention to the young flame-colored molly. Maplepaw's heart was hammering furiously against her chest, and she was amazed that her Clanmates couldn't hear it. The sound was nearly deafening.

"Maplepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" Sunstar asked.

Doubts flooded into Maplepaw's mind. What if she wasn't ready after all? Maybe she should wait a little longer before she had her ceremony–a little more training couldn't hurt. Her mind flashed back to every mistake, every missed piece of fresh-kill, every single

frustration she had run into during her training. She was a decent hunter and fighter, but she wasn't anywhere near the best by any means. Was she good enough to become a warrior?

Almost instinctively, she turned her gaze towards Bluefur, seated just a couple of tail-lengths away from her. The blue-gray molly nodded almost imperceptibly, barely enough for anyone to notice, but it was enough. Her resolve strengthened, Maplepaw looked back at Sunstar, exhaling slowly as she did so.

"I do," she meowed steadily.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Maplepaw, from this moment on, you will be known as Maplelight. StarClan honors your spirit and your courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Sunstar rested his muzzle against Maplelight's head, and the calico molly licked his shoulder respectfully. She stepped back and padded over to Whitestorm, Bluefur, and Rosetail, her head held high with joy. Maplelight sat down next to her now-former mentor as the Clan began cheering for the two new warriors.

"Maplelight! Whitestorm! Maplelight! Whitestorm!"

"Congratulations, you two," Bluefur purred, giving each of them a swift lick to the shoulder. She touched her nose gently to Maplelight's cheek and murmured, "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Bluefur," Maplelight murmured.

Tigerclaw raced over from the other side of the clearing to greet them next. "Congratulations!" he meowed warmly, his amber eyes glowing as he looked at Maplelight. "Good names, too. Sunstar must have thought for a long time about what to name you two."

"Glad you approve," Maplelight meowed teasingly. "I'd hate to disappoint you in any way."

Although it was clear from her tone that she was joking, Tigerclaw looked a little embarrassed for a moment. Maplelight flicked his shoulder with her tail to let him know that she was only messing

with him, and he seemed to relax considerably.

"Anyway," the dark tabby meowed, glancing rather nervously at her. "I made a nest for you in the warriors' den. It's close to the center, so you'll be right next to me."

"Thanks, Tigerclaw," Maplelight meowed sincerely. Then she frowned as another thought crossed her mind. "But isn't the center of the den where the senior warriors are supposed to sleep? I don't think they're going to want me there."

"You're not completely in the center," Tigerclaw explained. "I just didn't want you on the outside edge of the den. It gets pretty cold there and considering you have pretty short fur..."

"Oh." Maplelight couldn't hide her surprise at this surprising gesture of thoughtfulness. "Well, thank you, Tigerclaw."

"No problem," the older warrior purred. "You're supposed to keep a vigil tonight, but in the morning, I'll come to get you so I can show you to your new nest."

Maplelight nodded, although she wondered why Tigerclaw was so insistent on taking care of her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Bluefur giving her a knowing look, but she pointedly ignored her former mentor. Instead, she turned her attention to Whitestorm, who was having a conversation of his own with Tigerclaw now. As she approached the two toms, she was fairly certain that she heard her name mentioned once or twice, but she decided to brush it off.

"Come on, we should get ready for our vigil," she meowed. "The sooner we get started, the sooner the night will be over."

"Good thinking," Whitestorm agreed. He nodded to Tigerclaw and followed Maplelight to the middle of the camp, where they would be holding their vigil for the night.

As the rest of the Clan began to disperse towards their respective dens, Maplelight turned her attention to the moon rising steadily above the treetops. Briefly, she wondered if every single cat, mouse,

or other living creature in the world saw the same moon every night. It was a strange thought, she admitted to herself, but she wasn't exactly concerned with where her mind was wandering at the moment.

The sound of Tigerclaw's snoring drew her attention to the warriors' den. Through the entrance, she could just barely make out her friend's massive form as he slept a few nests away from Rosetail and Bluefur. She found it rather amusing that, despite her initial reluctance to go anywhere near Tigerclaw when she first joined the Clan, she could easily pick him out amongst a crowd of warriors despite extremely poor visual conditions. If someone had told her that she would consider Tigerclaw a friend back when she was still fresh out of Twolegplace, she would have laughed in their face.

But then again, he had changed over the past few moons–they all had, as a matter of fact. He wasn't the arrogant bully she had met on her adventure into the forest, and she wasn't a soft, overfed kittypet anymore. Of course, Tigerclaw still had his pride and Maplelight was still as stubborn and defiant when confronted with conflict as ever, but they weren't at each other's throats every moment of every day. They had grown up.

Maplelight knew that she still had a long way to go, however. She and Whitestorm would be taking on more responsibilities as warriors now; their Clan would be counting on them even more than they were before. Even worse, they wouldn't be able to avoid Thistleclaw all the time now since they were sharing a den.

On the other hand, however, they still had Bluefur, Rosetail, and Leopardfoot. Over the past several moons, Maplelight had come to regard the three older warriors as replacement sisters of sorts. Even Thrushpelt was beginning to take on an almost brotherly role in her life, although he seemed more interested in Bluefur than anything. And, of course, she, Whitestorm, and Tigerclaw all had each other. Whatever came their way, they would be more than ready for it.

"Why wasn't she called Mapleshade?" Night questioned.

"Sunstar probably heard the storys and didn't want to raise

suspicion," Reedshine answered.

Tiger

For the next several days, Tigerclaw tried and failed countless times to work up the courage to ask Maplelight the question he'd been dreaming of proposing ever since they had fought side by side against Raggedpelt, Foxheart, and Nightpaw.

He wasn't entirely sure what was wrong with him. After all, it wasn't as though it was a difficult question. It was just, "Will you be my mate?"–nothing more, nothing less. All he had to do was string together five simple words, yet for some reason, the task proved to be nearly impossible whenever he so much as looked at the calico molly. Tigerclaw had worked up the courage to approach her four times in the past three days but had failed to ask her every single time. The most embarrassing moment by far had been when he somehow ended up asking her if she would eat a mouse tail for him. That was one memory he would gladly suppress for the rest of his life.

Of course, being able to work up the nerve to ask Maplelight to be his mate wasn't the only problem Tigerclaw was faced with. On several other occasions, he had been about to approach her when he was intercepted by one of his other Clanmates asking him to do a favor for them. The last thing he needed was for Maplelight to think he was rude and inconsiderate, so he agreed every single time. After multiple days in a row of this, however, his patience was starting to wear thin. If he had to assist one more battle training session, his head was going to explode.

Whitestorm padded over to him, jolting the dark tabby out of his thoughts. On the other side of the camp, Maplelight was talking with Bluefur, Rosetail, and Thrushpelt, her body relaxed and her topaz-yellow eyes bright with happiness. Judging by the amused expression in Whitestorm's eyes, the younger warrior had seen Tigerclaw watching the pretty calico molly.

"You know, you aren't going to make any progress with Maplelight by sitting around and staring at her all day," the white tom pointed

out.

"I know, Whitestorm," Tigerclaw meowed, letting out a sigh of mixed exasperation and despair. "I'm trying, okay? I just can't seem to work up the nerve to ask her to be my mate. And I don't even know if she would want to be my mate, which just makes everything worse. What am I supposed to do if she rejects me?"

"I don't know," Whitestorm admitted.

"It's just..." Tigerclaw let his voice trail away for a few heartbeats, then spoke up again, "Maplelight–she's the only one in this entire world for me, you know what I'm saying? I know that sounds stupid and cliche, but I don't want anyone else as my mate. It's either going to be her, or it won't be anyone at all. But if I'm going to ask her...I want to know that she feels the same way."

"You want to know who feels the same way about what?"

Tigerclaw froze as Maplelight's sweet, gentle voice reached his ears. Slowly, he turned around to see her standing a few tail-lengths away from him, an expression of confusion on her face.

"Er, nothing!" he meowed hastily. "Nothing. I was just...talking about...birds!"

Great, just great, Tigerclaw thought with a groan. There was no way he was going to recover from this one.

"Oh yeah, I've always wondered how birds feel when we eat them for breakfast," Maplelight agreed, nodding solemnly.

Was she mocking him? He couldn't believe it. When he was so obviously trying not to lose his mind, she was mocking him.

"But seriously, what were you talking about?" Maplelight asked, tilting her head to the side.

"It's really nothing," Whitestorm meowed quickly, saving Tigerclaw the trouble of having to come up with another excuse. "We were actually talking about Bluefur and Thrushpelt. You know how he's been padding after her for...well, several moons by now."

"Oh yeah, I guess he kind of has," Maplelight agreed, frowning thoughtfully. "I hadn't really noticed before, but now that you mention it..."

Whitestorm shook his head in mock despair. "Maplelight, you're my best friend, but you are incredibly dense sometimes."

The calico warrior frowned. "Hey! I am not dense. I just have more important things to do than worry about my friends' relationships, that's all."

"Sure," Whitestorm meowed, nodding. "And that's why you're still completely unaware of the fact that–"

"Right, then," Tigerclaw meowed loudly, cutting off whatever the white tom was going to say next. The last thing he needed was for Whitestorm to accidentally reveal his feelings for Maplelight right in front of her. "Moving on now, do you want to come hunting with me, Maplelight? The fresh-kill pile is looking a little empty, and I'm sure we could have it restocked by tonight."

"Sure, good idea," Maplelight agreed cheerfully. "Want to try the Twolegplace border first? There's bound to be some prey lying around there today."

Tigerclaw nodded and got to his paws, padding alongside Maplelight as they headed for the gorse tunnel. They passed by Adderfang and Stormtail guarding the camp entrance, nodding to the older warriors as they walked past them. He wasn't entirely sure, but he was almost certain that he heard Adderfang whisper, "Good luck," to him.

Barely a few moments after they left the camp, Maplelight suddenly came to a halt, tasting the air. She turned her head to the right, focusing on something several tree-lengths away. Tigerclaw followed her gaze and saw a squirrel collecting some nuts and berries underneath an oak tree. He was impressed; how had she noticed it from this far away?

Silently, Maplelight dropped into the hunting crouch and began to stalk towards her prey. Since the squirrel was quite a long way

away, she was moving faster than normal but still managed to keep her pawsteps utterly silent. Once she was only a tail-length or so away, she pounced, nipping her catch on the back of its neck and killing it instantly.

"Well done!" Tigerclaw called out to her.

"Thanks!" Maplelight purred, her violet eyes sparkling with pride. She buried her squirrel under a pile of leaves and bounded back over to him. "Come on, the next one's on you."

As they continued through the forest, Tigerclaw sent a silent word of praise to StarClan for the fact that it was newleaf. The forest was full of prey, possibly enough to last them until leaf-fall. Of course, he knew that they would probably run out before the cold weather seasons arrived, but he would be sure to enjoy the good hunting until then.

By the time they reached the Twolegplace border, Maplelight had already managed to assemble two more squirrels, a robin, three mice, and a pheasant. Tigerclaw, for his part, had caught two pigeons, a blackbird, and three rabbits. Every single time Maplelight praised one of his catches, he felt a spark of happiness in his chest that couldn't be matched by any compliment he had ever gotten from another Clanmate.

He watched as Maplelight scanned the area for more prey, her ears pricked. It was painfully obvious to him that he was being presented with the perfect opportunity to tell her how he felt about her, but once again, his voice refused to cooperate with him. All he had to do was ask one simple question, but it was proving to be as difficult as chasing an adder in a thicket of brambles.

'Just talk to her!' a voice in his head urged. *'You might not get another chance to talk to her alone for a while.'*

Tigerclaw let out a sigh, knowing the voice in his head was right. "Hey, Maplelight?" he asked tentatively.

"Yeah? What is it?" Maplelight glanced over at him, relaxing her stance. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not really," he meowed reassuringly. "I just had a question for you."

"Go on, then," she replied, nodding.

"Well, I was just wondering...is there anyone in the Clan that you like?" he asked. Almost immediately, he wished he could take everything back. What sort of question was that? There was no way she wasn't going to see right through him.

Maplelight looked puzzled. "I mean, yeah," she meowed as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "I like a lot of cats. I've got friends, don't I?"

Tigerclaw shook his head. "That's not quite what I meant," he corrected. "I meant...do you like anyone...as in, is there anyone in ThunderClan that you would want as a mate?"

"Oh, well, I'm not really sure," the pretty calico warrior answered. "I hadn't really thought much about it before. I've mostly been focused on becoming a warrior since I got here."

"That's fair," Tigerclaw agreed with a nod.

Well, it wasn't quite the answer he was hoping for, but he tried to look on the bright side. At least it wasn't an outright no.

"Who knows though, I might want a mate someday," Maplelight added thoughtfully. "And maybe even have kits. But not for several moons or so. I want to serve my Clan as a warrior before I end up stuck in the nursery all day for six moons."

"That's a good plan," Tigerclaw meowed, feeling a spark of hope. Maybe all she needed was a little more time. If he asked her to be his mate in a few moons, perhaps she would be more inclined to agree then.

"Why the question anyway?" Maplelight asked, turning her amber gaze towards him. "I mean, no offense or anything, but it doesn't seem like something you would be interested in."

"Ah, that," Tigerclaw meowed awkwardly. "Well, you see..."

"Rosemary? Rosemary, is that you?"

At first, Tigerclaw sent a silent word of thanks to StarClan for saving him once again. Almost immediately, however, his relief faded when he noticed the furious expression on Maplelight's face. She was glaring at two cats on top of the fence separating the forest from Twolegplace. The first one was a reddish-brown molly and the second was a cedar tom with a tan muzzle and paws. Tigerclaw didn't need to hear the two cats introduce themselves to know who they were; the fury blazing in Maplelight's red eyes told him all he needed to know. These cats must have been her littermates, Reed and Apple.

"Rosemary! It is you!" the cedar tom exclaimed.

"That's not my name anymore," Maplelight snarled, glaring at her siblings. "If you aren't going to call me by my real name, I'm not going to bother with you."

"How are we supposed to know what your name is now?" the red-brown molly protested.

"That's your problem, Reed," Maplelight retorted. Tigerclaw watched the exchange nervously, wanting to jump to Maplelight's defense but knowing that she probably wouldn't appreciate him trying to fight her battles for her. "And just who do you think you are? I seem to remember you blaming me for our mother's death just a few moons ago. Now you expect me to talk to you as if we're friends or something?"

Reed looked away guiltily. Maplelight just glared at her, obviously not moved at all.

"We...we needed your help," Apple meowed when Reed failed to speak up again for several heartbeats. "Our housefolk threw us out and we don't have anywhere to go. We can't catch our own food, and nobody will take us in. Will you bring us to your new home and let us stay with you?"

Maplelight stared at her brother in disbelief. "You're asking me for help?" she asked incredulously. "After everything that you did to me

and after you called me a freak and tormented me at every opportunity, you expect me to help you?"

"I know we haven't been the nicest littermates in the world," Reed meowed desperately, finally finding her voice again. "But you're our sister. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Why should it? It never mattered to you before!"

The two former kittypets just stared at her, unable to refute anything she was saying. Maplelight paced back and forth, her tail lashing angrily.

"You can't seriously–you can't expect to just walk back into my life and expect me to welcome you back," she spat. "I might have been willing to forgive you at one point, but after you blamed me for Night's death? No. I'm happier where I am now, I have a better life than I ever did in Twolegplace, and yes, most of it is because I don't have to deal with you. There are cats now who are more like a family to me than you two ever were. They appreciate me, they treat me like I'm someone worthy of basic respect. I don't need you two anymore, and frankly, I never did. You mean nothing to me. Your Twolegs abandoning you is nothing more than karma finally coming around and biting you in the tail."

"Rosemary..." Reed whispered.

"And anyway," Maplelight continued, calming down slightly. "Even if I was stupid enough to agree to take you back to my home, it's not my decision as to whether you'd be allowed to stay. And honestly, I can't say that I could see Sunstar agreeing to take you two in. We don't need any more soft mouths to feed in ThunderClan."

She turned and stalked away into the trees, her tail still bristling with anger. Tigerclaw stared after her uncertainly, wondering if he should go after her. A moment later, however, she returned with two mice in her jaws. She tossed them in front of Apple and Reex, who stared between their sister and the two mice.

"Eat them," Maplelight meowed harshly. "Eat them, and then leave

and never return. If I see you on this territory again, I just might tell Thistleclaw that there are two kittypets in the area that need to be dealt with. And this time, Bluefur won't be around to save you."

There was no way Apple and Reed could know who Thistleclaw and Bluefur were. However, the thinly veiled threat in Maplelight's words was impossible to miss. The two loners nodded meekly, and Maplelight seemed satisfied. She turned around and stalked back in the direction of the camp, tossing a, "I'm going back to the camp now," over her shoulder to Tigerclaw as she walked by.

Tigerclaw cast one last look at Apple and Reed before padding after Maplelight. Before he had passed out of earshot, however, he heard Reed call out to him.

"What is it?" he asked sharply, turning around. He would never forgive these two cats for hurting Maplelight.

Reed shifted about nervously. "Tell...tell her that we said thanks for the meal, will you?"

Tigerclaw just looked at her. "You both really hurt her, you know," he meowed quietly.

"We know," Apple meowed despondently. "We're not proud of how we treated her, but–"

"But nothing," Tigerclaw interrupted. "Nobody forced you to treat her worse than dirt. You chose to bully her all on your own. I don't know how you can even justify coming here and bothering her again. She's the most amazing cat I've ever met, and the fact that you two had the nerve to..."

He broke off, taking a deep breath to calm himself. It wouldn't look good if he murdered two kittypets. Maplelight probably wouldn't appreciate him doing so, despite her threat to her littermates just a few moments ago.

"If you wanted to rekindle your relationship with her, then you should have apologized and changed your ways a long time ago," he told them finally. "But you failed to do so, and now she's never

going to forgive you–as well she shouldn't. I won't be passing on any sort of message for you. Next time, maybe you'll have the nerve to thank her personally instead."

With that, he turned and bounded off into the forest after Maplelight. As it turned out, it didn't take long to find her. She was sitting beside a tree stump, her blue eyes dull and her normally cheerful expression filled with misery.

"Maplelight?" Tigerclaw meowed tentatively. "Are you okay?"

Maplelight let out a sigh and turned to look at him. "Yeah, I think so," she replied quietly. "I'm sorry you had to see all of that."

"Don't be," he meowed reassuringly. "Your siblings are complete and utter idiots. If they can't see what a great cat you are, that's their problem."

"Thanks, Tigerclaw," Maplelight murmured.

"Anyway, they're getting exactly what they deserve. I'd love to see them try to catch a mouse," Tigerclaw added. "Can you imagine that?"

Maplelight nodded, snickering a little. Tigerclaw was relieved to see her looking a little happier than before. He hated it when she was upset about anything.

They continued on their way back to the camp, pausing along the way to pick up their fresh-kill. Along the way, Tigerclaw continued to make small talk with Maplelight to try to cheer her up. By the time they reached the camp, she was back to her normal self, talking almost nonstop about one subject or another. The two warriors entered the camp with their load of prey, padding over to the fresh-kill pile and depositing it with two simultaneous sighs of relief.

"Welcome back, you two," Sunstar meowed, walking over to them. "I see you both had a good hunt today."

"StarClan was good to us," Maplelight agreed.

The ThunderClan leader nodded. "Well, since you two did so well, I don't see any reason why you can't take the rest of the day off. Go take a piece of fresh-kill each and share a meal. I'll let Adderfang know to keep you two off the evening patrols."

"Adderfang?" Tigerclaw repeated in confusion. "What's he got to do with it?"

Sunstar let out a sigh. "Tawnyspots is ill again, so Adderfang is taking over his duties until he recovers."

"Again?" Maplelight asked, looking worried. "That's the second time in about as many moons. What's going on with him?"

"I don't know, Maplelight," Sunstar admitted. "We can only hope that this is just a passing issue that's lingering around longer than necessary." He shook his head. "But enough of all that. I've kept you around too long, so I'll let you both enjoy your meals now."

He nodded to them and padded away, heading over to speak to Adderfang, Sparrowpelt, and Fuzzypelt near the elders' den. Tigerclaw watched him for a few moments before picking up a pigeon from the prey pile and heading over to a shaded area beside the warriors' den. Maplelight joined him a moment later, a rabbit clutched in her jaws. The two warriors ate in silence for a few heartbeats before the calico molly spoke up.

"Do you think Tawnyspots will be okay?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," Tigerclaw admitted. He was wondering the same thing himself. "Goosefeather and Featherwhisker will try their best, I'm sure...but I don't know how much more he can take. He has been sick a lot, which isn't good for a cat's body. Sooner or later, it's bound to be too much for him to handle."

"Let's hope it's not for a while, though," Maplelight meowed grimly.

Tigerclaw nodded in agreement. While there were certainly other warriors who could take over Tawnyspots' position as Clan deputy if he died or chose to retire, the stress of making such a decision would be a lot for Sunstar to handle. They already had issues with

the other Clans to deal with, namely RiverClan who seemed determined to taunt them about the loss of Sunningrocks at every border patrol.

After they had finished their fresh-kill, Maplelight murmured that she was going to sleep for a while and padded into the warriors' den. Tigerclaw hesitated for a moment, then followed her inside. By the time he entered, she was already curled up inside her nest, her flank rising and falling steadily as she dozed away. Slowly, he padded over to his own nest beside hers and lay down, perfectly content to just sit there and watch the calico warrior.

"I love you, Maplelight," he whispered, and even though he knew she couldn't hear him, he was happy to know that he had finally managed to say what he'd been trying to get off his chest for moons.

Maple

The early-morning sunlight filtered in through the warriors' den, hitting Maplelight's pelt as she padded outside to join Bluefur, Stormtail, Tigerclaw, and Brindlepaw on the dawn patrol. She glanced over at the fresh-kill pile as she passed by, wondering if she should take something to eat before she left with the rest of the patrol. It was already almost time to go; she wouldn't have time to finish a meal. She would just have to wait until she got back home later that morning.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," Tigerclaw greeted her, a lighthearted gleam in his amber eyes. The ct warrior glared at him, and he meowed, "Someone's a little grumpy."

"You would know," Maplelight replied, yawning. "Who thought dawn patrols were a good idea anyway?"

"Probably one of the ancient warriors," Bluefur meowed, her whiskers twitching with amusement.

"Well, once I figure out which one, I'm going to take a trip to StarClan to claw their fur off," Maplelight muttered mutinously.

"I don't think that's possible, Maplelight," Stormtail informed her.

"We'll see about that."

Maplelight followed after Bluefur as her former mentor led the way out of the camp. Despite the fact that the sun was barely above the horizon, most of the forest was already awake. A robin was feeding its chicks in a nest up top a nearby tree, the babies flapping their tiny wings and chirping in earnest. Briefly, Maplelight wondered what baby bird meat tasted like, then quickly realized what a disturbing thought that was and immediately banished it from her mind.

'I guess that's what I get for leaving without eating breakfast,' she

thought ruefully.

"So, Brindlepaw," Stormtail meowed after some time had passed. "Can you tell me where we are now?"

His apprentice glanced around for a moment before responding, "We're almost at Sunningrocks. Once we get past those trees, we'll be there."

"That's right," Stormtail meowed, nodding. "And are we allowed to go on Sunningrocks right now?"

"No," Brindlepaw meowed, shaking her head. "It belongs to RiverClan right now. We can't trespass on another Clan's territory because the warrior code forbids it."

"Excellent. Well done, Brindlepaw," the blue-gray tom meowed approvingly. Maplelight couldn't help feeling as though he were asking her incredibly obvious questions but chose not to point that out. Brindlepaw was still young; maybe this was just how she learned best.

As they continued on their way along the RiverClan border by Sunningrocks, Maplelight became aware of Tigerclaw padding up to walk beside her. She twitched her ear slightly, wondering what he wanted with her. His strange behavior around her hadn't changed at all in the two moons since she had earned her warrior name, and it both confused and pleased her at the same time, or perhaps she was simply confused as to why it pleased her.

"Er, hi Tigerclaw," Maplelight meowed awkwardly. "Is, uh, is there something you needed?"

"Not really," the dark tabby answered. "I just wanted to talk to you, that's all."

"Oh, okay," she meowed. "What did you want to talk about?"

Tigerclaw flicked his tail. "Anything you want, I guess," he told her. "Dawn patrols can get pretty boring sometimes, so we might as well liven things up with a little conversation."

"Are we that boring, Tigerclaw?" Bluefur asked, looking rather amused. Tigerclaw, however, just shifted about uncomfortably.

"No, of course, not," he mumbled, staring down at his paws. "I just meant that–er, never mind."

"Well, if it's Maplelight you want to talk to, perhaps you two should go off on your own," Stormtail suggested. There was a strange gleam in his eyes that Maplelight couldn't decipher. "Head towards Fourtrees–we'll be staying along the RiverClan border. We'll meet you back at the camp later."

"Y-yeah, that sounds fine," Tigerclaw agreed, glancing nervously at Maplelight. "Er, is that okay with you?"

"Sure," Maplelight agreed, though she privately wondered why it was that everyone seemed so determined to get her alone with Tigerclaw.

They padded away from the group, meowing a quick goodbye to them as they left. As they walked towards Fourtrees, Tigerclaw's fur brushed repeatedly against Maplelight's, sending an odd tingling sensation down her spine. It wasn't exactly an unpleasant feeling, but she stepped to the side slightly all the same.

"Sorry," Tigerclaw muttered.

"No, it's fine," Maplelight meowed awkwardly. "I just...well, it doesn't matter."

What was going on with her today? It wasn't as though this was the first time she had patrolled alone with Tigerclaw, yet for some reason, doing so now was making her incredibly shy and awkward. Either way, it wasn't like her to behave in this manner. Maybe this was another side effect of skipping out on meals or something.

"I mean...if you didn't want to come with me, you didn't have to," Tigerclaw meowed after a few moments. He sounded sad at the thought, and Maplelight couldn't help wondering why. Why would it matter to him whether or not she wanted to patrol alone with him?

"No, I wanted to come," she reassured him, and despite her uncharacteristic feelings of shyness, she was telling the truth. "I guess I'm just wondering why everyone seems so insistent on getting us to patrol together all the time. I mean, have we ever been on a patrol without each other once in the past two moons?"

Tigerclaw frowned for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Now that you mention it, I think you might be right," he mused. He glanced at her and added, "I guess they really want us to end up together, don't they?"

Maplelight chuckled and shook her head, although she couldn't help noticing there was something odd about Tigerclaw's comment. It could easily be taken as a joke, but there was a strange look in his eyes behind the humor that she couldn't even begin to figure out. Besides that, there might have been some truth to his words. It did seem like a possibility that their Clanmates wanted them to become mates–after all, it was hard not to see the similarities between their behavior regarding her and Tigerclaw and their behavior regarding Bluefur and Thrushpelt. But if that was the case, she just wished she knew why they wanted her to get together with Tigerclaw so badly.

Briefly, she wondered what her life would be like if she did become mates with the dark tabby. She had no plans of doing so, at least not yet, but the possibility was intriguing nonetheless. If they got together, would they end up having kits? And if so, what would they name them?

'Hm...Petalkit is a cute name,' Maplelight thought to herself. Then she shook her head. *'Wait, why am I even thinking about kit names anyway? It's not as if Tigerclaw and I are actually mates, and I'm definitely not expecting any kits.'*

"Maplelight?" Tigerclaw meowed, snapping her out of her thoughts. "Are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm fine," Maplelight meowed hastily. "Just thinking a bit, that's all."

"What were you thinking about?" the large dark tabby warrior asked.

"Oh, nothing much, just..." Maplelight trailed off, unsure how to continue. She didn't want to tell Tigerclaw that she had been imagining what being mates with him would be like, but she couldn't just tell him it was nothing. He would never believe her. In a moment of desperation, she blurted out, "Tawnyspots. He hasn't gotten better at all. Do you think he's going to stay as our deputy?"

'Perfect,' she thought. *'Believable.'*

Fortunately, Tigerclaw bought the lie. "Yeah, I can see what you mean," he agreed, nodding. "I'm not sure, but I have a feeling he won't last much longer. I heard Goosefeather and Featherwhisker talking the other day, and they don't seem to have much hope for him either."

"Who do you think will be chosen if Tawnyspots retires?" Maplelight asked.

Tigerclaw looked thoughtful. "Probably Adderfang or Stormtail," he meowed. "They're two of the most experienced warriors in the Clan, and everyone respects them."

"Adderfang or Stormtail?" the calico warrior repeated in surprise. She didn't have anything against either cat, but she hadn't really considered either of them to be potential deputies before.

"Don't you like them?" Tigerclaw asked, his whiskers twitching in surprise.

"I do! Oh, yeah," Maplelight meowed quickly. "But I mean, they don't really seem like the leadership type, do they? Sunstar wouldn't just be choosing someone who can organize patrols and keep the Clan in line; he'd be choosing someone who might take his place as Clan leader one day. And, well, Adderfang and Stormtail just don't seem like the right cats for the job."

Tigerclaw paused for a moment, then nodded. "You have a point," he acknowledged. "Who do you think would be deputy, then?"

"Bluefur," Maplelight replied promptly. She knew she was probably biased due to her close friendship with the older warrior, but

anyone who looked at Bluefur would know that she would make a good deputy and a fine leader. Bluefur was a tough mentor and she had high expectations, but she was also gentle, kind, and compassionate: exactly the qualities a good leader needed to have. "Or maybe Leopardfoot. Rosetail, maybe, although she doesn't seem like the authority type."

"They would be good candidates," the dark tabby agreed.

"I know who definitely won't become deputy, though," she added.

"Thistleclaw?" Tigerclaw guessed.

"I was actually going to say any of the prey in the fresh-kill pile, but sure, that works too."

Maplelight would swear for the rest of her life that the sound of Tigerclaw's laughter frightened off all the prey in the forest from Fourtrees to Highstones that day.

Things to know

Maplelight eyes are and will always be yellow. In her re-born form her eyes change color depending on her mood, like a mood ring. Apple and Reed are Appledusk and Reedshine re-born, not really important to the story, yet. Sunstar knows of Maplelight's trun identity, that's why her name is Maplelight instead of Mapleshade. Tiny and his family never existed in this au. Firestar most likely won't make an appearance. Maplelight will have Patchkit, Petalkit, and Larchkit in a litter. Spottedleaf's heart will happen, just with a twist (be it better than the original). Bluefur will have Mosskit, Stonekit, and Mistykit at a later date than in cannon. Thistleclaw will get what's coming to him.

Maple

Maplelight padded through the gorse tunnel with a load of prey, followed closely by Tigerclaw and Whitestorm. Sunstar had assigned her to lead her first hunting patrol that morning, so she had invited her two friends to come along with her. She had been planning on inviting another warrior as well, but the rest of the Clan was busy with border patrols. There had been reports of ShadowClan warriors crossing the border, and Sunstar wanted extra reinforcements to ensure that their territory was safe.

"I'm going to take some prey to the queens," Maplelight meowed to Tigerclaw and Whitestorm. "I'm sure Spottedkit, Redkit, and Willowkit are driving Swiftbreeze up the wall by now."

"Meet us by the warriors' den when you're done," Tigerclaw told her. "We can share a meal together."

Maplelight nodded and deposited her load into the fresh-kill pile, keeping a squirrel and two voles to take to the nursery. She turned and padded across the camp, flicking her tail in greeting to Stormtail and Brindlepaw as they padded into the camp. The young apprentice's fur was dusty, and Maplelight guessed that they had just completed a battle training session. Briefly, she wondered what it would feel like to have her own apprentice. Of course, she knew it wouldn't happen for quite a while, but it was nice to dream.

As she approached the entrance to the nursery, Maplelight was startled to meet Thistleclaw coming out. Averting her eyes, she stepped back to allow the older warrior to pass, wondering what he had been doing in the nursery. It wasn't as though he had any reason to be in there; none of the kits were his. As a matter of fact, he didn't even seem to like the queens–or any of the mollies in ThunderClan, for that matter. His only concern with them seemed to be telling them it was their duty to produce kits for the Clan.

'Maybe that's all he was up to,' Maplelight thought, deciding to brush it off for now.

She pushed her way through the entrance and was immediately greeted by Redkit, Willowkit, and Spottedkit bounding up to her. The three kits bounced around her excitedly, all of them talking at once.

"Hi, Maplelight!" Willowkit meowed cheerfully. "Did you bring that for us? Can we play with it?"

"We can't play with fresh-kill, mouse-brain," Redkit scoffed.

"Hey! I'm not a mouse-brain," the little gray molly complained.

"Redkit, be nice to your sister," Swiftbreeze scolded her children from her nest. "And Willowkit, your brother is right. Fresh-kill is precious, and we owe thanks to StarClan for providing it for our Clan. We eat our prey; we do not play with it."

Willowkit dipped her head submissively and meowed, "I'm sorry, Maplelight."

"It's alright, Willowkit," Maplelight meowed, feeling a twinge of amusement. "I've heard worse questions from cats older than you."

She padded over to Swiftbreeze and deposited the squirrel in front of her before padding over to White-eye and placing the two mice at her paws. The two queens nodded to her gratefully, and Swiftbreeze divided up the squirrel into smaller pieces for her kits to eat. Satisfied that everyone would be well-fed, Maplelight turned around and walked out of the nursery and headed over to join Tigerclaw and Whitestorm outside the warriors' den, pausing along the way to take a rabbit from the fresh-kill pile.

"How did everything go?" Tigerclaw asked as she sat down next to him. "I didn't see Thistleclaw coming out of the nursery, did I?"

"It went fine," Maplelight confirmed. "Although, Willowkit wanted to know whether she was allowed to play with her food."

Whitestorm and Tigerclaw chuckled, and she continued, "As for Thistleclaw, yes, he was in the nursery. I ran into him when I was coming in to take the prey to Swiftbreeze and White-eye."

"That's odd," Whitestorm remarked, looking puzzled. "Thistleclaw's never taken any sort of interest in the nursery, at least not since Snowfur died. Why would he be visiting the queens now?"

"Maybe he's on punishment again," Tigerclaw suggested.

Maplelight thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement. That sounded like the most reasonable explanation to her. Thistleclaw must have done something to get himself in trouble with Sunstar again, and now he was being forced to care for the queens. She should have realized it before.

Then another thought struck her. If Thistleclaw was on punishment, surely he would have taken prey to the queens. Why hadn't Swiftbreeze and White-eye said anything about being fed already? She knew that queens ate more than other warriors in order to produce milk for their kits, but even they couldn't possibly eat two meals before sunhigh.

'Maybe he just hadn't gotten around to it yet,' Maplelight reasoned.

Even so, there was something about Thistleclaw's visit to the nursery that bothered her. She couldn't quite place her claw on what it was, but she knew that the gray and white warrior had been up to something. For a few moments, she contemplated going to Sunstar about it but decided against doing so. She didn't have any solid proof that Thistleclaw was causing trouble with the queens, and her leader had other things to worry about.

"Are you okay, Maplelight?" Tigerclaw asked, looking at her worriedly. Maplelight blinked and glanced over at her friend.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm okay," she meowed hastily. Deciding to change the subject, she went on, "So anyway, how long do you think it will be until Swiftbreeze's kits are apprenticed? They must nearly be old enough by now; they're not much younger than Brindlepaw and Frostpaw, and they've been training for almost four moons."

"I think it should be soon," Whitestorm answered. "Maybe within the next moon or so?"

"Who do you think will mentor them?" Maplelight wondered aloud.

"Only Sunstar knows, I guess," the white warrior meowed. "I think Featherwhisker was planning on taking Spottedkit as an apprentice, though. She likes to hang around him and now that Goosefeather is retired..."

Maplelight nodded and Tigerclaw spoke up, "It would be nice to mentor either Redkit or Willowkit, but I don't think I've been a warrior long enough for Sunstar to pick me yet. There are other more experienced warriors without apprentices. Rosetail, Goldenflower, and Lionheart haven't even had their first ones yet."

"You'd be a more likely candidate than me or Whitestorm, though," Maplelight pointed out. "We probably won't get to mentor any apprentices until White-eye's kits are six moons old, and they haven't even been born yet."

"Well, if we're lucky, maybe Sunstar will let us be mentors together," Tigerclaw suggested, his eyes almost lighting up at the thought.

"Maybe," she agreed, wondering why Tigerclaw seemed so interested in doing everything together with her–and, more importantly, why she felt a twinge of warmth at the thought of spending time with the dark tabby as well.

The three warriors continued their conversation for a while, joking and laughing at the expense of their Clanmates on occasion. Once she finished her meal, Maplelight decided to go out for a walk. There were still a good few hours left until sunset, leaving her plenty of time to stretch her legs and maybe check the borders before it was time to head to bed for the day. She got to her paws and turned to head for the gorse tunnel, only to be stopped just a few heartbeats later as Whitestorm called out to her.

"Where are you off to?" he asked curiously.

"I thought I'd go for a walk," Maplelight answered. A thought struck her, and she added, "You can come along too. I mean, if you want to, that is."

"Sure," Whitestorm agreed cheerfully. "Coming, Tigerclaw?"

However, the dark tabby shook his head apologetically. "I promised I would help check the elders' den for leaks. Apparently Larksong's been complaining about aching joints, and Featherwhisker wants to make sure the roof doesn't have any holes," he meowed. "Maybe next time, though."

"Alright, then," Maplelight agreed, trying to suppress a pang of disappointment.

She turned around and walked across the camp through the gorse tunnel, followed closely by Whitestorm. As they began their trek through the forest, Maplelight suddenly became aware of her friend looking at her with amusement clear in his yellow eyes. Puzzled, she glanced back at him, tilting her head to the side questioningly.

"What is it?" she asked. What is he staring at he like that for?

"Nothing at all," Whitestorm meowed, chuckling. "You just seem disappointed about something. Were you hoping that Tigerclaw would join us?"

"So what if I was?" Maplelight asked, feeling oddly defensive. "He's my friend. I can want to hang out with my friend if I want to."

The white tom just shook his head. "Well, you seem to be figuring things out, if nothing else."

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded. Whitestorm opened his mouth to respond, and she added quickly, "And don't you dare say, 'You'll figure it out in a few moons,'. I want a real answer now."

"There's no need to be pushy," Whitestorm replied mildly. Maplelight just glared at him, and he relented. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry. But it's really not my place to tell you. If you want to know what everyone's been talking about, you need to ask Tigerclaw."

"Tigerclaw?" Maplelight repeated, her annoyance immediately replaced by bewilderment. "What does he have to do with anything?"

"He...well, you need to ask him," Whitestorm meowed finally. He paused for a moment, then asked, "But if you don't mind, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Maplelight agreed.

Whitestorm looked at her evenly, an unusually serious expression on his face. "I need to know right now–do you like Tigerclaw?"

"W-what?" the calico molly exclaimed, taking a step back. "Why would you ask that?"

"Just answer the question, Maplelight," Whitestorm meowed.

Realizing that she had no other choice, Maplelight began pondering her friend's question. Did she like Tigerclaw? Her first instinct was to say yes, of course, she liked him. They were friends, after all. Why wouldn't she like one of her friends?

But who was she kidding? She knew perfectly well that wasn't what Whitestorm meant. His question was almost exactly like the one Tigerclaw had asked her two moons ago; there was no way this one didn't have the exact same meaning. The only problem was, she didn't know if she liked Tigerclaw in that way or not. Maplelight had never spent much time–or rather, any time–thinking about potential mates. It wasn't as if she didn't like him; she just hadn't put any thought into it before.

"I don't know," she admitted after several heartbeats. "I mean, I don't...not like him. It's just that I haven't really thought much about it. I've got other things on my mind right now."

"Fair enough," Whitestorm replied, nodding. "That's all I needed to know."

As they continued their walk, however, Maplelight found that she couldn't take her mind off of the white tom's question. She was curious too; she wanted to know if she liked Tigerclaw–and more importantly, she wanted to know why her spine tingled every time he brushed up against her pelt or why his amber gaze felt like a cool drink of water on a warm newleaf day. But she had no idea

who to ask, nor did she have any intention of doing so. She had to preserve some sense of dignity, after all.

'What in StarClan's name is wrong with me?' Maplelight wondered, shaking her head to herself. *'I don't have time to think about stuff like this. My duty is to my Clan and my warrior duties; nothing more, nothing less. I can't afford to let myself be distracted by anything. Whatever this...thing...that's going on with me and Tigerclaw is will just have to wait.'*

Tiger

"You're joking."

"No, I'm being serious."

"You must be joking."

"Believe it or not, it's true."

Maplelight laughed and shook her head. "You mean to tell me that you've never heard of a parrot before?"

"No–but I'd love to hear what they are," Tigerclaw meowed. In all honesty, however, he wasn't particularly interested in learning what these strange creatures were. He just wanted an excuse to listen to Maplelight ramble on about any random topic.

"Well, they're not really that interesting. Just birds that Twolegs like to keep in their homes," the calico molly confessed. "They're really pretty though–their feathers are a lot brighter than the birds you see here in the forest. I guess that's probably why I've never seen any here; I mean, I imagine having feathers that bright would make hiding from predators a bit difficult."

"Probably," Tigerclaw agreed. "So Twolegs keep other animals as pets too?"

Maplelight nodded. "They keep all sorts of pets. Cats, obviously, and dogs too. There's also the occasional bird and even fish as well. My old housefolk used to have a pet goldfish, as a matter of fact."

"What do you mean 'used to'?" Whitestorm asked. Tigerclaw jumped slightly; he'd been so focused on Maplelight that he'd forgotten the white tom was there as well.

At the question, the calico molly looked a bit sheepish. "Oh, well, I was bored one day and my siblings didn't exactly want me playing with them...so, well, I decided to play with the fish instead. I'm sure

you can guess how that turned out."

Tigerclaw tried to picture Maplelight as a tiny kittypet, watching in confusion as her Twolegs' pet goldfish took its last breaths. The mental image was quite amusing, and he snorted with laughter. Maplelight just looked at him, half-amused, half-exasperated.

"I'm glad you find my story so entertaining," she meowed dryly.

"It's only because it's you," Tigerclaw admitted. "You could tell me a story about eating breakfast and I would still listen to every word."

Maplelight didn't seem to know what to say to that. "Er, well, thanks," she replied awkwardly.

Whitestorm glanced between the two of them and meowed, "I'm going to go see if the elders need any fresh bedding." Giving Tigerclaw an almost imperceptible nod of encouragement, he got to his paws and padded off in the direction of the elders' den.

Left alone with Maplelight, Tigerclaw could only watch as she chewed a mouse tail absentmindedly, her green eyes distant as she stared off into space. He was tempted to ask her what she was thinking about, but as usual, his ability to speak was failing him. After a few moments, however, she turned back to him with a questioning expression on her face.

"I almost forgot, there's something I've been meaning to ask you," the calico molly meowed.

"Of course, what is it?" Tigerclaw asked.

She hesitated for a few heartbeats. "Well, I was just wondering if you happen to have any idea why everyone–"

The rest of her question was cut off, however, as Sunstar walked over from his den to speak to them. Tigerclaw looked up at his Clan leader, wondering what he wanted with them. If there was Clan business that needed to be taken care of, shouldn't he speak to Tawnyspots or one of the senior warriors instead?

"I apologize for interrupting you two," Sunstar meowed, his eyes

gleaming. "But I wanted to congratulate both of you. You're about to reach yet another milestone in your growth as ThunderClan warriors."

The two warriors just looked at him. Sensing their confusion, the bright ginger tom clarified, "You're both about to become mentors. Swiftbreeze's kits are going to have their apprentice ceremony in a quarter moon, and I want Maplelight to mentor Redkit and Tigerclaw to mentor Willowkit."

Tigerclaw felt a thrill of excitement. He was going to mentor an apprentice! Even better, he would be a mentor alongside Maplelight, giving him even more of an excuse to spend time with her. He glanced over at the calico molly and saw that her eyes were shining with delight.

"Thank you, Sunstar," she meowed, dipping her head.

"We won't let you down," Tigerclaw added.

"I know you won't," Sunstar replied. He nodded to the two of them and walked away, going over to join Thrushpelt's hunting patrol.

In the midst of his excitement, Tigerclaw almost forgot about Maplelight's earlier question. Once he had calmed down, however, he suddenly remembered that she had been meaning to ask him something. He turned to speak to his friend, who glanced up from her fresh-kill when she realized he wanted to talk to her.

"By the way, what was your question again?" he asked.

"Huh? Oh, right." Maplelight swiped her tongue over her jaws and sat up. "Well, it's kind of a stupid question, actually, but I was just thinking about when you asked me if there was anyone in ThunderClan that I liked, and I was wondering...well, first of all, is there anyone you like?"

To say Tigerclaw was surprised by the question would be the understatement of the moon. He was so startled that for a few moments, he could only splutter and stammer awkwardly as he tried to formulate a coherent response. Out of everything she could

have asked him, this hadn't even crossed his mind. Despite his shock, however, he felt a twinge of hope. Maybe, just maybe, he was finally making progress with her after all.

"Well, yes," he replied finally. "I've...actually liked her for a while now, as a matter of fact."

"Really?" Maplelight asked, looking surprised. "And...just how long is 'a while'?"

"Ever since we were apprentices," Tigerclaw admitted. *'If that isn't a dead giveaway, I don't know what is.'*

However, the calico molly just looked even more surprised. "It's been that long and I didn't notice?" she meowed.

"No offense, Maplelight," Tigerclaw meowed slowly. "But you wouldn't notice if anyone liked someone even if they shouted it from the top of the Highrock."

Maplelight opened her mouth to protest, then shut it. "I suppose you're probably right," she agreed begrudgingly. She shook her head. "Anyway, what's she like? I assume she must be special if she's managed to keep your interest for this long."

"She is," he confirmed. "She's the most incredible cat I've ever met, an amazing warrior and an even better Clanmate. And she's the most beautiful cat in the forest, in every way possible. I've known that I want to be with her for moons now."

"But you couldn't because you were still an apprentice," the calico warrior guessed. Tigerclaw nodded. "What about now, though? Have you asked her to be your mate yet?"

Tigerclaw shook his head. "Not yet," he admitted ruefully. "It's a bit difficult to get her alone, and I don't really want an audience when I ask her."

"Fair enough," Maplelight conceded. She hesitated for a moment, then added, "But...how do you know you like her? Or, well, how did you finally figure it out?"

"I don't really know how I figured it out," the dark tabby meowed. "I think I just knew. Whenever she's around, every piece of fresh-kill tastes better, the sun is brighter and warmer, and it just feels as though nothing could ever go wrong. And when she's happy...well, she's beautiful no matter what, but especially so then. She just...glows. I don't know how else to put it, but I want to make sure she's always happy. Even if she doesn't want to be with me, I just want that for her."

"Wow," Maplelight meowed once he was finished speaking. "You really like this molly, don't you? She's a lucky one."

"Like her? I don't think there are many other cats who mean more to me than she does," Tigerclaw meowed in full honesty. "What about you? Is there someone you like?"

Maplelight hesitated for a moment, then nodded, her pink eyes shining. "I think so," she replied. "I mean, I don't know if I like him as much as you like...whoever she is, but he's an amazing cat and I really like being around him. But I don't think he'd ever look twice at someone like me."

"Well, if he can't appreciate you, then he's the biggest idiot in the forest," Tigerclaw meowed firmly.

"Thanks, Tigerclaw," she chuckled. "He is a nice cat, though. I just meant that I don't think he would like me because...well, I mean, I'm not really anything special."

Tigerclaw was tempted to refute her statement because it was just wrong in so many ways. She was special; there was nobody else in the entire forest like her. But he refrained if only to keep his secret safe. He knew that Maplelight liked someone now, but he still had no idea who it might be. The last thing he wanted was to confess his feelings to her and then learn that she was interested in someone else.

"I mean, you might not be the future leader of ThunderClan or descended from any of the ancient Clans that roamed the forest, but that doesn't mean he wouldn't like you," he meowed at last. "Just look at Bluefur. She's cool, don't get me wrong, but at the end of the

day, she's still just an ordinary warrior. Yet that hasn't stopped Thrushpelt from mooning over her every moment of every day, has it?"

Maplelight thought for a few heartbeats, then meowed, "You have a point there."

"So, who is this tom anyway?" Tigerclaw asked, half hoping that it was him and half convinced that he couldn't possibly be the one she was talking about.

"Hey, that's not fair," Maplelight protested. "You didn't tell me who you like."

"You go first," he replied, well aware that he was only stalling at this point.

"No, you."

"You're going first."

"No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes."

"No. I can do this all day, you know. So I suggest you admit my superior skill in stubbornness and just tell me who you like."

Tigerclaw shook his head. They were never going to get anywhere at this rate. "Alright, you win," he meowed. He narrowed his eyes playfully and added, "But I'm going to figure it out, one way or another."

"Naturally," Maplelight deadpanned. She stood up and shook herself off. "Anyway, I'm sure we could continue this conversation all day, but I don't think Sunstar would be pleased if we spent the rest of the afternoon lazing around. What do you say we go for a quick hunt and check the borders?"

"Do I get to ask you more questions about your mystery tom?"

"Tigerclaw."

"Alright, I get it. Not funny."

Tigerclaw followed the calico molly out of the camp, feeling the usual surge of contentment at getting to spend time with her. Maybe she wasn't ready to tell him who she liked yet, but that was fine with him. He had to look on the bright side, after all. At least he knew that she did like someone, meaning there was still a chance for him.

It also meant he had more time to figure out how to confess to her. And really, where was the harm in that?

Maple

Most of the time, Maplelight prided herself on being cool and confident. She could take all of Thistleclaw's insults while resisting the temptation to slash her claws across his face. She could face down an entire ShadowClan patrol without the slightest hint of fear. And she could face the judgmental stares of the cats from the other Clans who still thought, even after all this time, that she wasn't fit to be a warrior simply because she was born in Twolegplace.

At the moment, however, cool and confident were the last words Maplelight would use to describe herself. Somehow, she had allowed Tigerclaw to trick her into telling him that she liked someone, and now it was only a matter of time until he figured out that he was the one she'd been talking about. Ordinarily, she might not have been bothered by this, but now that she knew he was also interested in someone, she would rather eat her own tail than admit her feelings for the dark tabby. Even though Tigerclaw hadn't actually mentioned any names, Maplelight just knew there was no way confessing was going to bring anything other than pain and humiliation.

"So anyway, about this mysterious love interest of yours..." Tigerclaw spoke up after a while.

Maplelight let out a sigh. "I already told you, Tigerclaw. I'm not going to tell you who it is."

Unfortunately, her friend wasn't so easily fazed. Instead, he merely twitched his ear and replied, "That's fine. I guess I'll just have to try to guess, won't I?"

"Now, wait just one moment," Maplelight protested. "If you're going to try to guess who I like, the least you could do is let me try to figure out who you like."

She was certain that she had him trapped now. There was no way he was going to let her figure out which molly he was interested in.

If there was one thing she knew about toms, it was that they hated appearing vulnerable. Her secret was safe.

"Fine by me," Tigerclaw meowed, flicking his tail.

'Well, that didn't go according to plan at all.'

Feeling defeated, Maplelight meowed, "Alright, then you go first."

"Okay, then." Tigerclaw narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, ducking underneath a low-hanging branch as they continued on through the forest. "Well, you did say it was a he, so I think we can rule out any of the mollies in ThunderClan. And I assume it's not Thistleclaw either."

"Great StarClan, no," the calico warrior exclaimed. "I can't imagine ever liking him of all cats."

Tigerclaw laughed before continuing, "Does he have a mate?"

"No," Maplelight answered, before adding quickly, "At least, I don't think he does."

"So it can't be Adderfang or Sparrowpelt, then," the dark brown tom concluded. "And it's probably not Stormtail either, I assume."

"Stormtail has a mate?" Maplelight asked in surprise, momentarily distracted from the conversation at hand.

"Dappletail," Tigerclaw meowed. "Or, well, everyone thinks they're mates. They certainly spend more time together than normal friends, but nothing has ever been confirmed, so..."

Maplelight just nodded. Now that she thought about it, Dappletail and Stormtail did spend an unusual amount of time together. He must have started pursuing her after Moonflower's death. Then again, Bluefur didn't seem particularly close with her father, and Maplelight wondered if, perhaps, his relationship with Dappletail had anything to do with that.

"Anyway," Tigerclaw continued, snapping her back to reality. "Is the cat...Sunstar, by any chance?"

"Sunstar?" Maplelight repeated in disbelief. "He's too old for me!"

The tabby warrior chuckled. "Yeah, you're probably right," he agreed sheepishly. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, "So, I know you said he doesn't have a mate, but do you know if he likes anyone?"

'Oh, no, no, no,' Maplelight thought, feeling a surge of dread. *'Please don't ask that. Please, no. Anything but that.'*

She wanted to claw herself for being so stupid. Of course, of course, he just had to ask a question whose answer was sure to be a dead giveaway. What was she supposed to do now? Maybe she could lie and say she didn't know...but no, he would see right through her. Subtlety had never been her strong suit.

"Er, well, I–" she stammered awkwardly, not entirely sure how to continue. *'StarClan, get me out of this!'*

As if her warrior ancestors had heard her prayers, at that moment, Thrushpelt emerged from the trees, clutching a squirrel in his jaws. Tigerclaw looked a bit annoyed at the interruption, but Maplelight didn't think she'd ever been happier to see the sandy-gray warrior in her entire life. He padded over to them, setting his squirrel down so he could speak properly.

"Hello there, you two," Thrushpelt greeted them. "Are you off on a hunt, then?"

"Yes, we are," Maplelight answered, unable to hide her relief at his interruption. "Er, it looks like you've caught a nice squirrel there."

Thrushpelt's whiskers twitched. "Thank you, Maplelight. I'm just going to take this back to the camp. You two have fun."

'No, wait, don't leave!'

"Uh, actually, maybe I should help you out," Maplelight meowed quickly. "You know, better safe than sorry. Foxes and badgers and all that. Sorry Tigerclaw, but we can continue our conversation later."

"Oh, er, alright, then," Tigerclaw agreed, looking rather confused. "I'll just hunt at Fourtrees for a bit before I go back to the camp, then."

With that, he turned around and walked off in the direction of Fourtrees. Breathing a sigh of relief, Maplelight turned around and followed Thrushpelt back in the direction of the camp. She knew she was being immature, but she didn't particularly care. At least it was better than Tigerclaw finding out about her stupid feelings for him. Maplelight was seriously starting to wonder if it was possible to eat her own heart out.

"So, what was that all about anyway?" Thrushpelt asked suddenly. "You seemed oddly eager to get away from Tigerclaw just now."

"Oh, that," Maplelight meowed evasively. "Well, it's nothing, really. Just...stuff."

"Does it have anything to do with you being in love with him?" the older warrior guessed.

At that moment, Maplelight was exceedingly grateful that she wasn't eating or drinking anything. "W-what?" she stammered. "W-why would you ask something like that?"

"There's no point in denying it, Maplelight. The entire Clan can see it," Thrushpelt meowed quietly.

"Oh no," Maplelight groaned. There was no way she was going to get out of this now.

"Sorry, Maplelight, but you're not exactly good at hiding your feelings," the sandy-gray tom meowed wryly. "Why don't you just tell him already?"

"Tell him? Are you insane?" She shook her head. "I can't do that. There's no way he feels the same way."

"How do you know that?" Thrushpelt asked reasonably.

"Well, I know he's also in love with someone, and judging by how he described her, I know it couldn't possibly be me," the calico

warrior replied. "He made her sound like the greatest gift StarClan has ever bestowed upon the forest, but I'm nothing special. I'm just a regular warrior, same as anyone else."

"That's what being in love does to you. When you're in love with someone, even a pile of mouse dung can look as beautiful as a sunset on a clear evening."

"Oh, thanks, Thrushpelt," Maplelight meowed dryly. "It's so flattering to know that you think I look like a pile of mouse dung."

"I didn't mean it like that, Maplelight," Thrushpelt sighed, looking a bit exasperated. "I only meant that just because you don't think you're anything special doesn't mean that Tigerclaw thinks the same thing."

Maplelight just shook her head. Maybe there was a chance–but no, she couldn't do it. She just knew there was no way Tigerclaw loved her. He was in love with someone else; there was no way of denying it. Thrushpelt's reasoning might apply to other cats, but it certainly didn't work for her.

"Look," Thrushpelt meowed quietly. "I know you're worried he's going to reject you–believe me, I understand that completely. But it would be worse if you didn't try at all because then you'll always be left wondering what might have happened. He hasn't rejected you yet; there's still every possibility that he's going to say yes. But if you don't say anything, then in a few moons or so, you might find that he's moved on and has another mate and kits."

Maplelight paused for a moment. What Thrushpelt was saying did sound reasonable, she had to admit. "I suppose so..."

"Go on, then," the older warrior meowed encouragingly.

Her mind made up, Maplelight meowed a quick goodbye to Thrushpelt and raced off towards Fourtrees before she had a chance to back out. This was it. In just a few moments, this day was either going to turn out to be one of the best or worst ones of her life depending on how Tigerclaw responded to the confession she was desperately trying to work out how to say. That is if she managed to

figure out how to get her mouth working again by the time she found him.

Tigerclaw had just finished burying yet another mouse under a pile of leaves when he heard Maplelight's voice calling out to him. Turning around, he saw the calico molly running towards him, looking a bit disheveled but still just as beautiful as ever. She came to a halt in front of him, panting slightly as she tried to catch her breath.

"Are you okay?" he asked, more than a little alarmed. "You aren't being chased, are you?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Maplelight meowed once she was able to speak again. "I was just...coming to look for you."

"You were?" Tigerclaw asked, trying to suppress the rising feeling of hope inside of him. She probably just wanted to finish hunting with him. "Er, did you need something?"

"Not exactly. I mean, yes. Well, I guess it depends on how you look at it." She looked rather nervous, which wasn't like her at all. Tigerclaw's interest was piqued even further. If she was acting this way, then whatever she needed had to be important. "I just, um, needed to tell you something."

She hesitated for a few moments, shifting about nervously. Tigerclaw simply waited patiently for her to speak, still trying to force down the small seed of hope growing in his chest. He was being ridiculous, he told himself. There was no way she was nervous because of him, and even if she was, it definitely wasn't because of the reason he wanted it to be. Not that he wanted her to be nervous around him, of course.

Finally, after several moments, Maplelight finally opened her mouth to start talking again. Unfortunately, all that came out was a bit of incoherent mumbling.

"Er, sorry?" Tigerclaw meowed apologetically. "Could you repeat

that? I didn't quite catch it."

"I–I love you," Maplelight repeated, a bit louder this time. Tigerclaw froze, and she cringed. "Sorry, sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. It's just that Thrushpelt told me I should tell you–you know, just to get it out in the open. So here we are. You don't have to say anything, I already know that you don't like me, but I just figured..."

As she rambled on, Tigerclaw barely heard a word. He was too busy trying to figure out if he had somehow died and gone to StarClan. Logically speaking, he knew he had to say something in response, but his mind could only focus on one thing at the moment.

'She loves me.'

'She loves ME.'

'She LOVES me.'

'SHE LOVES ME.'

Without thinking, Tigerclaw pressed his cheek against Maplelight's. He felt the calico warrior stiffen ever so slightly for a moment before relaxing against him. Purring almost too hard to speak, Tigerclaw curled his tail around her and licked her gently between her ears.

"I love you too," he whispered.

Tiger

A few days later, Tigerclaw was awoken by the sound of Sunstar summoning the Clan for a meeting. Yawning, he blinked the sleep from his eyes and turned to nudge Maplelight awake. She groaned softly before blinking her eyes open, looking up at him with a questioning expression on her face.

"Wake up," he whispered. "Sunstar just called a meeting."

"Alright," Maplelight meowed, yawning. "Lead the way, then."

The two cats padded their way out of the warriors' den to join their Clanmates at the base of the Highrock. They walked over to sit next to Bluefur, Rosetail, and Thrushpelt, who nodded at them in greeting. As he glanced around the clearing, Tigerclaw noticed Redkit, Willowkit, and Spottedkit receiving a thorough washing from their mother, Swiftbreeze. A jolt of excitement hit him like lightning as he realized what was about to happen. At long last, Tigerclaw and Maplelight were going to become mentors.

"Clanmates, we are gathered today for one of the most important moments of a ThunderClan warrior's life," Sunstar meowed from the top of the Highrock. "Spottedkit, Redkit, and Willowkit have reached their sixth moon, and it is time for them to begin their training as apprentices."

A murmur of approval rose from the surrounding cats. With only two apprentices in training at the moment, the Clan was eager to increase their ranks, especially since Brindlepaw and Frostpaw would be due for their warrior ceremonies soon. Even Thistleclaw looked approving, almost pleased, at the thought of having three new apprentices in the Clan. But as Tigerclaw looked closer, he noticed that the spiky-furred tom's attention was entirely fixed on Spottedkit. He frowned slightly; *'what was Thistleclaw thinking?'*

"Willowkit," Sunstar meowed, snapping Tigerclaw's attention back to his leader. "From this moment on, until you earn your warrior

name, you will be known as Willowpaw. Maplelight, you will be Willowpaw's mentor. You were trained excellently by Bluefur and you have shown yourself to be a warrior of fierce courage and quick thinking. I trust that you will pass on all the skills you possess on to this apprentice."

Maplelight dipped her head and padded forward to touch noses with Willowpaw. Once their ceremony was complete, they walked back over to sit with the rest of their friends. Out of the corner of his eye, Tigerclaw saw Bluefur give Maplelight a gentle nudge of congratulations.

"Redkit, from this moment on, you will be known as Redpaw," Sunstar meowed, turning to the pale gray molly. "Your new mentor will be Tigerclaw. Tigerclaw, you had an excellent mentor in Leopardfoot and you have shown yourself to be a warrior of compassion and loyalty. I trust that you will pass on all the skills you possess and the knowledge you gained from Leopardfoot onto your new apprentice."

As Tigerclaw walked forward to touch noses with Redpaw, he couldn't help reflecting on how strange it was that Sunstar would choose his compassion as one of his most noteworthy traits. He owed that to Leopardfoot and Maplelight, he knew. Well, mostly to Maplelight–after all, if she hadn't wandered into the forest that day, he would have been mentored by Thistleclaw for the duration of his apprenticeship. If that had happened, would he still be as compassionate as he was today?

'Not likely,' Tigerclaw thought, gently guiding Redpaw back over to where his sister was sitting next to Maplelight.

Now, it was Spottedkit's turn. The pretty tortoiseshell molly was looking up at Sunstar, her amber eyes shining with excitement. And once again, Thistleclaw's own yellow gaze was fixed intently on the soon-to-be medicine cat apprentice. The expression in them was hard to read, but nevertheless, Tigerclaw felt a shiver run down his spine. Beside him, Maplelight let out a soft growl, and he saw that she was glaring at the gray and white warrior. Clearly, she didn't like the interest he was showing towards Spottedkit either.

"We have a special mentor for our last kit," the ThunderClan leader announced. "Featherwhisker has announced that he would like to take on an apprentice, and Spottedkit has agreed to train under him. So Spottedkit," he meowed, looking down at the small molly, "is it your wish to train under Featherwhisker and learn the ways of a medicine cat?"

There was no hesitation in Spottedkit's voice. Her eyes shining, she lifted her head up proudly and replied, "It is."

"Then from this moment on, you will be known as Spottedpaw. At the next meeting between the medicine cats, you will travel with Featherwhisker to the Moonstone to receive the blessing of our warrior ancestors. Good luck, young Spottedpaw. The good wishes of your Clanmates go with you."

Spottedpaw nodded respectfully and walked over to sit beside Featherwhisker. As she took her place beside her new mentor, several cheers rose for the three apprentices.

"Redpaw! Willowpaw! Spottedpaw!"

"Well done, you three," Swiftbreeze purred, licking each of her kits on the head. "Now, you make sure to listen to whatever your mentors tell you to do, understood?"

"We will," Redpaw promised, nodding fervently.

"We won't let you down," Willowpaw added.

"Don't worry. Your mother and I know you two will make fine warriors," Adderfang meowed, padding over to join them. "And Spottedpaw will become an excellent medicine cat."

Slowly, the crowd began to disperse as the rest of the Clan left to take care of their own duties. Willowpaw and Redpaw bounded up to their mentors, looking as eager as newborn kits seeing the camp for the first time.

"What are we doing first, Tigerclaw?" Redpaw asked, practically bouncing up and down. "Can we start our training now? Hunting? Fighting? Anything! I want to become a warrior as soon as

possible."

Tigerclaw glanced up at the sky. The sun was about to set, and he knew they wouldn't have time for a training session today. "Not yet," he decided. "It's going to be dark by the time we're ready to go, and you still need to prepare your nests in the apprentices' den. We'll go out first thing tomorrow morning."

"We'll join you," Maplelight spoke up. "What do you say we go on a tour of ThunderClan's territory tomorrow?"

The two apprentices nodded eagerly before racing off towards their new den. Tigerclaw watched them go, feeling a twinge of amusement. He could still remember the excitement he felt on his first day as an apprentice, as well as his declaration that he would be the best apprentice in the Clan. Granted, he hadn't had much competition at the time–or any at all, rather, considering he had been the only apprentice in training until Maplelight came along.

"Those two certainly are excited," Bluefur chuckled, walking over to join them. "Then again, who can blame them? I remember being like that for my apprentice ceremony."

"So do I." Leopardfoot was there as well. "I also remember that Pinestar didn't say anything about the ceremony beforehand, so you showed up covered in mud!"

"Leopardfoot," the blue-gray molly groaned as Maplelight snorted with laughter. Tigerclaw tried to suppress his own snickers as he imagined Bluefur as a young kitten, her pelt covered in mud as Pinestar talked about how she would make an excellent warrior one day.

'Well, she's one of the frontrunners to replace Tawnyspots as Clan deputy, so I guess being all muddy didn't make too much of a difference,' he thought.

As he walked back to his nest in the warriors' den, Tigerclaw felt a wave of contentment as he curled up beside Maplelight. He had his first apprentice, the respect and comradery of his Clanmates, and finally, finally, he was mates with the cat who meant more to him

than anything in the world. The cat he had been under Thistleclaw's influence seemed like a distant memory now.

Maple

The sun was just barely above the horizon as Maplelight and Tigerclaw led their apprentices out of the camp. Redpaw and Willowpaw bounded along eagerly, looking around themselves at the forest with wide eyes. Maplelight suppressed a purr of amusement, remembering her own amazement when she saw her territory for the first time. Of course, Bluefur had made sure that she knew the forest as well as the back of her paw by the day's end, and she aimed to do the same with her own apprentice.

Soon, the four cats had arrived at the base of Sunningrocks. Once they were there, Maplelight came to a stop and turned around to face the apprentices.

"Right," she meowed, mostly to Willowpaw. "This is Sunningrocks. We can't go past this spot at the moment since this land belongs to RiverClan, but I want you to take note of what you smell here."

Redpaw sniffed the air, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "It smells awful!" he exclaimed. "Like–like...water, but...rotten, somehow."

"That's RiverClan scent you're smelling," Maplelight informed him, suppressing a chuckle. "Remember it well."

"Why does Sunningrocks belong to RiverClan if it's on our side of the river?" Willowpaw asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Sunningrocks has been fought over by our Clans for countless seasons. Right now, it belongs to RiverClan because they won it from us last time," Tigerclaw answered. "That will be remedied soon enough. But for now, we should move on to our next stop."

They continued on their way for a while, stopping every so often to quiz their apprentices on various landmarks. Redpaw and Willowpaw were fast learners and were able to answer most of their

questions with quick accuracy. There were a few mistakes here and there, but that was to be expected on the first day, and Maplelight and Tigerclaw did their best to make sure the apprentices understood where they had gone wrong before moving on. Eventually, they reached the Owl Tree, and Maplelight turned to Redpaw and Willowpaw once again.

"This is the Owl Tree," she meowed, gesturing towards it with her tail. "Owls are birds that eat the same prey that we do. They're also a danger to cats. They only come out at night, however, so as long as you only hunt around here during the daytime until your fighting technique is perfected, you'll be able to avoid them."

"However," Tigerclaw interjected. "Despite the threat to ThunderClan they pose, owls can be useful as well. Can either of you take a guess as to how?"

Both of the apprentices just stared at them blankly, so Maplelight prompted, "I'll give you a hint. What do owls have that we don't?"

Redpaw's face screwed up in thought as he pondered the answer. "Wings?" he meowed hesitantly.

"Well done, Redpaw," Maplelight meowed approvingly. "And if owls have wings, what can they do that we can't?"

"Fly," Willowpaw replied promptly. As soon as he heard his sister's response, Redpaw's eyes lit up in understanding.

"Oh! I get it now!" the tortoiseshell tom exclaimed. "Since owls can fly, they can get a view of the forest from up high. We can track owls at night to find prey because they'll be able to see better than we can."

"Exactly right, Redpaw," Maplelight praised the apprentice. "We'll save the owl tracking for another time, though. Right now, we need to make our way over to the Twolegplace border."

"That's where you were born, right?" Redpaw asked, hurrying along as his mentor turned and began heading in the direction of her former home. "Thistleclaw mentioned that when he visited the

nursery one time."

"Yes, I was born in Twolegplace," Maplelight confirmed, feeling an unpleasant twinge in her stomach at the mention of the gray and white warrior. It wasn't the fact that he was apparently going around talking about her past that bothered her but the fact that he had been going to visit the nursery multiple times. She wanted to ask Redpaw what he had been doing, but she knew it wasn't the time. "I decided to go exploring one day when I was six moons old and I...well ran into Tigerclaw, Bluefur, and Thistleclaw."

"Really? That was when you and Tigerclaw met?" Willowpaw asked, her blue eyes shining. If she was hoping for a 'love at first sight' story, she was going to be very disappointed. "Did you like him then?"

"No," Maplelight replied, chuckling at the memory. "As a matter of fact, I thought he was an arrogant, stuck up idiot whose head was so big, it was a miracle he knew how to stand. But that's a story for another time. We're here now, so I want you to remember a few things. First of all, what do you smell?"

Redpaw and Willowpaw sniffed the air. "I think I smell crowfood," the tortoiseshell apprentice volunteered.

"And something else too," Willowpaw added. "It's better than the crowfood stench, but it doesn't smell like ThunderClan either. I don't really know how to describe it. But it's definitely a cat."

"The crowfood stench is the scent of rogues," Tigerclaw meowed. "And Willowpaw, what you're smelling is the scent of kittypets."

"Now, both kittypets and rogues are cats outside of the Clans, but there are a few key differences," Maplelight spoke up. "For one, kittypets belong to Twolegs and mostly stay inside their homes all day. Rogues are cats that don't have Twoleg owners but don't belong to one of the four Clans either. They're also much more likely to attack when they see a Clan cat, unlike kittypets who usually flee."

"What about loners?" Redpaw asked, tilting his head to the side.

"Swiftbreeze was talking about some loners she met once. What kind of cats are they?"

"Loners are a sort of in-between of kittypets and rogues," Tigerclaw answered. "Just like rogues, they don't have Twoleg owners and usually roam wherever they please. However, they tend to be on the more docile side like kittypets."

"Now, it's important to remember that just because rogues, loners, and kittypets usually behave in a certain manner doesn't mean every single one will," Maplelight told them. "And no matter what, if you see any on our territory, chase them off. Don't use your claws if it's not necessary, but if it is, do whatever it takes to drive them away. It's important to send a message that they're not welcome here."

Redpaw looked at her in confusion. "But you were born in kittypet and you didn't leave," he pointed out.

"True," she acknowledged, although she didn't elaborate any further. Now wasn't the time to get into a detailed history of her past. "That was a bit of a unique case, however. Perhaps I'll tell you the story another day, but we don't have time right now. Anyway, you shouldn't make an example of my case. We can't go around accepting every cat that happens to cross the border into ThunderClan."

"Why not?" her mate's apprentice asked. "If it worked out with you, then surely it could work with other cats."

"It's not just a question of whether or not an outsider could become a warrior, Redpaw," Tigerclaw explained patiently. "There's more to being a member of ThunderClan than hunting and fighting. What matters the most is whether or not a cat is loyal and willing to sacrifice anything, even their lives, to protect their Clanmates. Rogues and loners, who are used to satisfying their own interests, and kittypets, who are usually pampered and rely on others to care for them, would have difficulty adapting to our lifestyle."

"But it worked with Maplelight," Willowpaw meowed, looking confused.

"That's true," Maplelight's mate agreed. "There are always exceptions, just as Maplelight said."

"Even so, though," the calico molly interjected. "It's still better to just drive off any trespassers. An outsider might be able to learn the ways of the Clans, but that doesn't mean it would be practical to accept them. We already have enough mouths to feed in ThunderClan, and our territory only extends so far, as I'm sure you've learned today."

"Why did Sunstar let you in, though?" Willowpaw asked again, though not maliciously. She seemed genuinely curious.

With a small sigh, Maplelight realized that she was going to have to try to explain as best she could. She wasn't exactly an expert in gray areas, so to speak, but she knew it was her duty to teach Willowpaw everything he needed to know. Frowning in thought, she tried to figure out the best way to explain her situation to her apprentice.

"Well, as I mentioned earlier, my circumstances were unique," she meowed finally. "After I fought Tigerclaw, I had several wounds that I knew were going to leave scars. Usually, when kittypets get hurt, they're taken to the Cutter for treatment. But I couldn't go back."

"But why?" Redpaw looked even more puzzled than before.

"Because most Twolegs don't want kittypets that look like they have something wrong with them," Maplelight explained. "When a Twoleg picks out a cat to keep as a pet, they typically look for the most beautiful ones they can find. Kittypets have gone missing after they went home to their owners after an accident that left them permanently scarred or disfigured. I knew that if I went back that day, my Twolegs would likely do the same to me. Bluefur took me to ThunderClan because I had nowhere else to go."

Her apprentice nodded in understanding. "I think I get it," she meowed. Then she frowned again. "But what about rogues and loners? They don't really have anywhere to go either, so why don't we ever offer to let them join?"

"Rogues and loners are used to not having a place to call home. Kittypets aren't," Maplelight reminded him. "And remember what we told you earlier. Just because they can become warriors doesn't mean it makes sense to let them join."

"Besides," Tigerclaw spoke up again. "Most of them seem to be perfectly happy with their lives. I doubt they would be interested in joining the Clans anyway."

They continued on through the rest of the forest, covering every single one of ThunderClan's borders and landmarks. By the time they arrived back at the camp, the sun was beginning to set. Maplelight was exhausted and her paws felt as though they were about to fall off. Despite her weariness, however, her heart was soaring with pride. Willowpaw was an incredibly gifted apprentice– as was Redpaw, for that matter. More importantly, she wanted to learn. She wanted to understand why things were the way they were, and she asked all the right questions. She was certain that, if she kept it up, she would be a warrior in no time.

After dismissing their apprentices, Maplelight and Tigerclaw each took a piece of fresh-kill from the pile and walked over to eat beside the nettle patch. Bluefur and Whitestorm were already there, chewing on their own pieces of prey. Maplelight settled herself down next to her former mentor with Tigerclaw taking the spot beside her.

"Welcome back, you two," Bluefur greeted them. "How did the first-day tour go?"

"It went fine, actually, it went great," Maplelight meowed sincerely. "Willowpaw's a natural. I'm looking forward to teaching her how to hunt and fight. If today was any indication, she'll be able to figure things out with no problem."

"What about Redpaw?" Whitestorm asked.

"He was brilliant as well," Tigerclaw answered. "A bit more on the quiet side than his sister, but when he answered a question, he

usually got it right."

"So, what's the plan for tomorrow?" Bluefur inquired.

Maplelight thought for a few moments. In truth, she hadn't planned what the next day's training would include. Most of the time, mentors taught their apprentices proper hunting techniques before they got to fighting, but something told Maplelight to switch it up. Not that there was anything wrong with teaching Willowpaw how to hunt first, but she wanted to make sure she could protect himself from enemies.

"I'm taking Willowpaw battle training," she replied after a few moments. "I want her to learn how to defend herself before anything else."

"A wise decision," her former mentor commended. "What about you and Redpaw, Tigerclaw?"

"I think I'm going to take him hunting," the dark tabby answered.

"Well, let's hope you and Maplelight can stand being apart from each other for a few hours," Whitestorm joked.

"Whitestorm," Maplelight groaned. "Don't worry. We know how to be professional. Sunstar named us mentors for a reason."

"Really?" her friend asked, looking at her in mock confusion. "And what reason would that be?"

"Because he just knew that Maplelight and I were meant to be mentors together."

"Because of my amazing wit and charm, obviously."

"You flatter yourself too much, Maplelight, dear."

"Yeah, yeah, Bluefur. You wish you were as cool as me."

After she finished her meal, Maplelight headed over to the warriors' den, where she curled up in her nest and fell asleep almost instantly. A few moments later, Tigerclaw padded in as well and

curled up next to her, but she was already fast asleep by then and didn't notice. It had been a long day–a good day, but still, a long one–and there was even more work to do in the morning. If tomorrow's training session was going to be a success, she would need as much energy as possible.

Maple

"Hold still, Redpaw! Honestly, if you keep fidgeting, I'm never going to be able to treat your bite."

"I'm trying! It still stings, you know."

Maplelight purred with amusement as she watched Spottedpaw attempting to treat a wound on Redpaw's shoulder. Maplelight had taken Redpaw out for a quick hunt as her mate took care of the elders. Her mate's apprentice had been hunting a rat earlier that afternoon that turned on him and bit him. He seemed fine, but she had taken him to see Featherwhisker so he could get it treated in case of an infection. As it turned out, however, the medicine cat was out collecting herbs, meaning Spottedpaw was left to care for her brother.

"Not bad, Spottedpaw," Maplelight remarked, observing the job the younger molly had done. "You're a natural at healing."

"Thank you, Maplelight," Spottedpaw purred, her amber eyes glowing with pride.

"Can we go back out now?" Redpaw asked hopefully. "My shoulder feels loads better and I wanted to try catching a squirrel."

"Oh, no you don't," his sister meowed sharply. "You're going to stay in the camp for the rest of the day. I don't want you aggravating your injury again."

Redpaw looked over at Maplelight, but the calico molly just shook her head. "Sorry, Redpaw, but I'm not going to argue with a medicine cat."

"Aw." He frowned in disappointment. "Okay, then."

Maplelight chuckled quietly, then stiffened as another scent wafted over her scent glands. She turned her head to see Thistleclaw

pushing his way into the medicine den, his jaws full of pigeon feathers. His eyes narrowed when he saw her, and Maplelight returned his gaze coldly. Although she had no way of knowing what business he had in visiting the medicine den, she knew he couldn't be up to any good.

"Thistleclaw," she greeted the older warrior sharply. "What are you doing here?"

"That's none of your business, but if you must know, I came to give these to Spottedpaw for her nest," Thistleclaw snapped.

"Is that so?" Maplelight asked, sneering. "How very...caring of you, Thistleclaw. Tell me, what did you do to get yourself in trouble again?"

The spiky-furred warrior growled at her and stormed over to Spottedpaw, dropping the feathers at her paws with a huff. Spottedpaw took the feathers and muttered what Maplelight assumed was some sort of thanks, but she couldn't help noticing that the tortoiseshell molly didn't meet Thistleclaw's gaze. She also couldn't help noticing that Spottedpaw hurried over to her nest with her feathers as quickly as possible, as though she couldn't wait to get out of his presence.

'Can't say I blame her,' Fireheart thought wryly, watching as Thistleclaw turned around and stalked out of the den. Shaking her head, she turned to look down at Redpaw, who was staring up at her with wide eyes.

"Sorry about that," she apologized softly. "He just annoys me, that's all."

The younger cat purred, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "That's okay. You're right, he is annoying."

Maplelight shook her head. "Come on, we should get going. I'm sure Spottedpaw has a lot of work to do until Featherwhisker gets back. Go and get something to eat, but don't leave the camp."

Redpaw nodded and scampered out of the medicine den, heading

straight for the fresh-kill pile. Maplelight followed more slowly, meowing a quick goodbye to Spottedpaw as she left. As she stepped out into the clearing, she looked around for something to do. She had been planning on training with Redpaw all day and as such hadn't been assigned to any patrols. Now that he would be spending the rest of the day recovering from his rat bite, however, her entire afternoon looked to be open.

"Maplelight! Over here!"

Bluefur was standing at the edge of the gorse tunnel with Rosetail, Sparrowpelt, and Lionheart beside her. When Maplelight looked over at her, she waved her tail and beckoned for her to come over.

"What are you doing? I thought you were going to take Redpaw out today," the blue-gray warrior meowed by way of greeting.

"I was, but Redpaw got a rat bite and he's supposed to take the rest of the day off," Maplelight answered.

"I see," Bluefur murmured. "Well, we're just about to leave on a border patrol. You can come along if you want."

"Sure, thanks," she agreed gratefully. The last thing she wanted to do was lie around in camp all afternoon. "Let's go, then."

She fell in line behind her former mentor as she led the way out of the camp. It was a clear day out, and Maplelight sent a silent word of thanks to StarClan for the good weather. Leaf-fall would be ending soon, and the more clear weather they had until leaf-bare, the better for hunting. The lack of rain certainly wasn't unwelcome either, although Maplelight was fortunate to have shorter fur than most of her Clanmates.

"Hey, I almost forgot," Bluefur meowed suddenly. "Thistleclaw came out of the medicine den looking as if he wanted to claw someone's fur out. Any idea what that was all about?"

"Oh yeah, that," Maplelight replied, grimacing as she remembered her argument with the gray and white tom. "I mean, it wasn't much. Just a friendly discussion between two Clanmates. You know, the

usual."

"What did you do?" her former mentor asked, whiskers twitching.

"I didn't really do anything. Just asked him what he did to get in trouble again," Maplelight answered. "He was taking feathers to Spottedpaw for her nest, so I assumed he was on punishment for something. Probably tried to fight a WindClan kit or something, I don't know."

"Sunstar usually punishes his warriors by assigning them to care for the elders and queens, not the medicine cats, though," Lionheart pointed out from behind them. "And why would Thistleclaw give Spottedpaw feathers for her nest but not Featherwhisker?"

'Fair point,' Maplelight mused, frowning to herself. Out loud, she meowed hesitantly, "I don't know, maybe Sunstar gave him a bigger punishment than normal since Thistleclaw tends to cause trouble. And maybe he was doing their nests one at a time."

But on the other hand, Thistleclaw had been acting strangely around Spottedpaw even before she left the nursery. Maplelight hadn't forgotten about his mysterious visit to the nursery that one day, nor had she forgotten the fact that she was the only one Thistleclaw paid attention to during her and her siblings' apprentice ceremony. Now he was giving her feathers for her nest.

'And now that I think about it, most of the Clan only use moss for their nests, Spottedpaw included. Why is he bringing her feathers?' she wondered.

Of course, it was entirely possible that the three incidents were completely unrelated and she was worrying over nothing. Even so, Maplelight couldn't suppress a pit of worry in her stomach. There was something about Thistleclaw's behavior that wasn't right, but for the life of her, she couldn't figure out why it made her fur stand on end and her spine tingle with suspicion.

Eventually, the topic of discussion moved on to various Clan gossip, and Maplelight pushed her misgivings about Thistleclaw and Spottedpaw to the back of her mind. Maybe she was worrying over

nothing, she told herself as she laughed at Lionheart's story about the time he and Goldenflower played a prank on Dappletail. Maybe her dislike of the gray and white warrior was causing her to overreact. Maybe there really was nothing going on.

She tried to tell herself all of this, but somehow, she couldn't make herself believe it.

If there was any doubt that there was something going on with Thistleclaw and Spottedpaw, it was gone within the next three days.

Over that period of time, Maplelight witnessed the spiky-furred tom making frequent trips to the medicine den. Too frequent. He was there almost every single day, although he made sure to carry herbs or moss in order to alleviate suspicion. But Maplelight wasn't fooled. She knew there was no way Featherwhisker and Spottedpaw would need to replenish their stocks this frequently. The Clan had been mostly healthy all season; there was no way they could have used up as many herbs as Thistleclaw was bringing in. To add to the suspiciousness of his behavior, he only ever seemed to bring fresh moss or herbs when Featherwhisker was out of the camp.

Tigerclaw had noticed it as well. On the third day, as they watched Thistleclaw disappear into the medicine den with a bundle of catmint in his jaws, Maplelight's mate turned to her with a displeased look on his face.

"If he's trying to make himself look inconspicuous, he's not doing a very good job," the dark tabby growled. "I don't know how the rest of the Clan hasn't realized that something's up."

"Should we talk to Sunstar about it?" Maplelight asked. Despite every instinct screaming at her to do so, she still felt hesitant. Technically speaking, Thistleclaw wasn't committing any crimes as far as she knew. The only thing he was doing was making a few too many trips to the medicine den when Spottedpaw was alone, but there was nothing in the warrior code about how often a cat was allowed to visit the medicine cat and the fact that Spottedpaw was always on her own during Thistleclaw's visits could very well have

been entirely coincidental.

She felt a pang of mixed relief and apprehension when Tigerclaw shook his head. "Right now, we only have circumstantial evidence, and if Thistleclaw is doing what I think he's doing, we'll need better than that," he meowed.

Maplelight nodded. "So what should we do until then?"

"Keep an eye on him," Tigerclaw replied. "That's the only thing we can do. And maybe, if we're lucky, we'll be able to catch him in the act."

Maplelight nodded in agreement and exhaled slowly. Perhaps it wasn't the best plan in the world, but what could they do about it? If it meant putting an end to whatever Thistleclaw was doing, she wasn't going to complain.

Maple

Maplelight watched, frowning in concern and frustration as Willowpaw missed yet another easy piece of prey. The young molly had been distracted all morning, barely acknowledging her when she told her they were going to go hunting that afternoon. When she had asked her if she was alright, she had claimed that she was fine, but things had only gone downhill from there. Most of the time, Willowpaw was an excellent hunter, but today she seemed incapable of catching even the slowest, scrawniest mouse.

"Alright," she meowed as Willo watched the creature she had been attempting to catch–a vole–scamper away with a despondent look on her face. "What's going on with you today? I've seen you hunt before and I know you're better than this, so what's wrong? And don't tell me it's nothing because I know that's not true."

Willowpaw shifted about nervously. "It–it's really nothing," she replied quickly. "I'm just having an off day today, I guess."

"Come off it, Willowpaw. We both know you aren't going to fool me with that," Maplelight meowed sternly. More gently, she added, "I'm here to listen to anything you have to say, you know. If there's anything bothering you, you're always welcome to tell me about it."

For a moment, she thought the young molly was going to refuse again. After a few moments of silence, however, she blurted out, "I'm worried about Spottedpaw."

"Go on," she meowed encouragingly, trying to suppress her fur as it began to stand up along her spine. She had a feeling she knew what was about to come next, and she felt no surprise as Willowpaw continued speaking.

"It's just...she seems really bothered about something lately," her apprentice meowed, fidgeting slightly. "When I went to get mouse bile from her yesterday so I could take care of Goosefeather's ticks, she looked as if something was upsetting her. But when I asked her

if she was okay, she barely said anything. I don't think she wanted to talk about it. And, well, I don't know if you've noticed, but Thistleclaw's been visiting her a lot recently..."

"I did notice, actually," Maplelight admitted. Over the past moon, she had seen Thistleclaw make almost daily visits to the medicine den. "But I don't know what he's doing in there all the time."

"Neither do I," Willowpaw meowed, shaking her head. "But I was just thinking that...well, what if him being in there with Spottedpaw all the time is the reason she's been acting so strangely lately?"

Maplelight thought for a few moments. Willowpaw had made a good point, she realized. Spottedpaw had always been a bright, cheerful young molly, and Maplelight didn't think she'd ever seen her in a bad mood. She certainly wasn't the type of cat to display the level of moodiness that Willowpaw had described, but evidently, that had changed over the past moon–coincidentally, or perhaps not, as Thistleclaw's visits continued.

"It's possible," she answered finally. "Has Spottedpaw talked about what Thistleclaw does when he visits her at all?"

"I haven't asked her," Willowpaw admitted. "But I can tell that she doesn't like it. I happened to be in there once or twice when he came to see her, and he never did anything when I was there, but I don't know what goes on between them when I'm not around. And I could just tell that she was uncomfortable, you know?"

"I know what you mean," Maplelight murmured, remembering the way Spottedpaw had all but fled to her nest when Thistleclaw came to give her those feathers. Pushing the memory to the back of her mind, she asked, "Do you want me to talk to someone about what's going on? I'm sure Sunstar and Featherwhisker would be willing to help Spottedpaw if Thistleclaw's been bothering her."

However, Willowpaw just shook her head. "I don't want to bother Sunstar about it just yet," she meowed quietly. "But...if it's not too much trouble, do you think you could talk to Spottedpaw? Maybe you can ask her what's been going on."

"Of course," Maplelight agreed gently. "If it's not too much of a bother, I'm going to talk to Swiftbreeze too. She'll want to know as well."

The light tabby apprentice relaxed visibly. "Thanks, Maplelight," she meowed gratefully. "I won't forget this."

Their talk seemed to do the trick, for Willowpaw was back to her usual self for the rest of the hunt. By the time they returned to the camp, she had caught two squirrels, three mice, and a robin. Despite her slow start, she had done well, and Maplelight felt she had more than atoned for her mistakes earlier that day. Not that she could fault her for that, of course, considering she had only been worried about her sister.

As Willowpaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile to deposit her load, Maplelight stood at the edge of the camp, debating as to whether she should speak to Swiftbreeze or Spottedpaw first. On one hand, Swiftbreeze was Spottedpaw's mother and deserved to know if someone was hurting her daughter. On the other hand, if she talked to her first, the queen would almost certainly insist on coming to speak to Spottedpaw with her, and Maplelight didn't want the young medicine cat apprentice to feel as if she was being cornered. In the end, she decided that it would be best to talk to Spottedpaw first and made her way over to the medicine clearing.

On her way there, she was approached by Bluefur, who was carrying a bundle of watermint in her jaws. She paused as the older warrior walked up to her, blue eyes warm and friendly.

"Maplelight," Bluefur greeted her, flicking her shoulder with her tail. "If you're going to see Featherwhisker, you'll need to wait. He's out collecting watermint right now–apparently, most of the stock rotted. He asked me to help take this back for him."

"Thanks, but it's actually Spottedpaw I wanted to visit," Maplelight told her former mentor. "Willowpaw told me she's been acting strangely ever since Thistleclaw started visiting her, and I offered to ask her what he's been doing."

"Ah, I see. In that case, I'll come with you," the blue-gray molly meowed.

"Thanks, Bluefur," Maplelight meowed, dipping her head to her friend.

Together, the two mollies walked the rest of the way to the medicine den side by side. As they prepared to push their way through the fern-covered entrance, however, they paused as they heard voices coming from inside. Maplelight felt her fur stand on end and a shiver ran down her spine. She recognized Thistleclaw's voice.

"I'll bring you more feathers tomorrow, Spottedpaw. Only the best for our Clan's medicine cat," Thistleclaw purred. Maplelight hoped with all her heart that she never heard him do it again. Somehow, Thistleclaw's purring made his voice sound even more horrific.

"T-thank you, Thistleclaw," Spottedpaw stammered, her voice barely audible. Willowpaw had been right; she did sound uncomfortable. "B-but I'm not actually a medicine cat. I'm still just an apprentice."

"Of course," the gray and white warrior meowed in that same sickly sweet voice. "You know, it's a shame that a cat as pretty as yourself chose to be a medicine cat. I'm sure if you were a warrior apprentice, there would be quite a few toms interested in you. Your kits would be as beautiful as you are, Spottedpaw."

Maplelight stepped back, her head spinning. Whatever she had been expecting to hear, somehow the truth was worse. She wanted to vomit. If this was how Thistleclaw had been talking to Spottedpaw for the past moon, it was no wonder she had seemed so disturbed when Willowpaw went to collect mouse bile. Maplelight glanced over at Bluefur and saw a look of mingled horror, disgust, and fury on the older warrior's face. She was certain that her own expression was the same.

There was no way they could let Thistleclaw get away with this. Her resolve strengthened, Maplelight pushed her way into the medicine den with Bluefur at her side, blocking Thistleclaw's path as the spiky-furred warrior turned to leave. He recoiled visibly, his

fur bristling as he nearly stepped on a berry that had rolled behind him.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his yellow eyes wild. "What do you want?"

"Save it, Thistleclaw," Bluefur spat. "We heard everything."

Thistleclaw stared at her for a few heartbeats, then whirled on Spottedpaw, who shrank back at his anger.

"You planned this!" he snarled accusingly. "You told Bluefur and that–that kittypet–that I've been visiting you, didn't you? Well, dear Spottedpaw, your little ploy isn't going to work."

"I–I didn't tell them, I swear!" Spottedpaw meowed desperately, backing away from the furious warrior.

"Liar!" Thistleclaw spat.

"Thistleclaw, that's enough! Leave her alone!" Maplelight growled, pushing her way in between the two cats and shielding Spottedpaw from Thistleclaw. "She didn't tell us anything. We were coming to deliver watermint when we heard you talking to her from outside the den."

"Is that so?" The gray and white tom's eyes were gleaming. "Then you'll know that I wasn't doing anything wrong. I was just paying her a few compliments."

"Don't give us that load of fox dung," Bluefur snarled. Despite the situation they were in, Maplelight felt a shiver run down her spine at the rage burning the blue-furred warrior's eyes. She hoped she never found herself on the wrong end of that expression. "That was no compliment, what you were saying to her. You had no business talking to her the way you did. For the love of StarClan, she's not even eight moons old, Thistleclaw."

Thistleclaw glared at them. "If you say a word–"

"You'll what?" Maplelight interrupted, taking a step towards her most hated Clanmate. "You'll kill us? Nice try, Thistleclaw, but not

even you can take on two warriors at once. And how do you think it would look to the rest of the Clan if Bluefur and I, two cats you hate more than anyone, just happened to turn up dead?"

"Fine, then tell them. Tell everyone, if you must," he snarled. "Nobody will ever believe you. Everyone knows you two are biased against me. You would do anything to turn my Clanmates against me."

"Really?" Bluefur asked coldly. "It's three cats' word against one, and considering everything you've done, Thistleclaw, who do you really think Sunstar is going to believe?"

Thistleclaw continued to glare at them, but eventually, he realized that he was fighting a losing battle and let his fur lie flat. Maplelight nodded to Bluefur, signaling that they could lower their aggression as well.

"Now, here's what's going to happen," she meowed in a voice like ice, her ruby-red eyes darkened. "We're going to take Spottedpaw to talk to Sunstar so she can tell him everything you did to her. And you, Thistleclaw, will be coming with us. Don't even think about trying to escape because if you do, there's an entire clearing filled with warriors outside who will come running as soon as they hear us calling for backup. Understood? Good."

With that, Maplelight moved to stand behind Thistleclaw as Bluefur padded in front of him. Spottedpaw, who had kept silent during the confrontation with the spiky-furred warrior, went to stand beside Maplelight. The four cats walked out of the medicine den with Thistleclaw in between them like a rogue prisoner. As they walked over to Sunstar's den beneath the Highrock, Maplelight felt Spottedpaw nudge her flank and turned to look down at the younger cat.

"Thank you," Spottedpaw meowed, keeping her voice low so that Thistleclaw didn't overhear. "I know I should have told someone a long time ago, but I didn't know what to do...I mean, he always acted friendly and said so many nice things, but it always felt...well, creepy."

"It's not your fault," Maplelight meowed soothingly. "Thistleclaw was trying to manipulate you. He's the only one who's done anything wrong here, Spottedpaw. We aren't going to fault you for being too afraid to speak up. But you need to tell Sunstar everything–and I mean everything. He'll put a stop to Thistleclaw's behavior, I promise."

"Do you think he'll believe me?" Spottedpaw asked, her eyes fearful.

"He will," Maplelight promised. "Sunstar knows you're not a liar, Spottedpaw. And if he doesn't, we'll see to it that Thistleclaw never goes near you again, no matter what lengths we have to go to in order to stop him."

Spottedpaw relaxed visibly, her expression filling with relief and gratitude. "Thank you, Maplelight."

"No problem," the calico warrior meowed warmly.

With that, Maplelight gently rested her tail on the younger molly's shoulder and gently led her on as they made their way over to talk to Sunstar.

Maple

[image]

Sunstar was eating a mouse when Maplelight, Bluefur, Thistleclaw, and Spottedpaw entered his den. The ThunderClan leader looked up from his meal, his whiskers twitching in surprise when he saw them. Maplelight supposed she couldn't blame him. They did make for a rather strange-looking group.

"Hello, you four," Sunstar greeted them. "How can I help you?"

"Spottedpaw has something she wants to tell you, Sunstar," Bluefur meowed, dipping her head to the bright ginger tom.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at Spottedpaw curiously.

Instead of answering, the younger molly just looked down at her paws, shifting about nervously. Seeing her hesitation, Maplelight gently touched her nose to Spottedpaw's ear.

"Relax," she murmured. "Remember, he's going to believe you. And we'll be here to support you no matter what."

Spottedpaw flashed her a grateful glance. "Thanks, Maplelight," she whispered.

Taking a deep breath, she padded forward to stand in front of Sunstar. "I–I have to talk to you," she began awkwardly. "It–it's about Thistleclaw."

Thistleclaw let out a low, soft growl, his claws sliding out. Maplelight and Bluefur glared at him, and he quickly stood down. They weren't about to let him frighten Spottedpaw out of telling Sunstar what he had done to her.

"Go on," the ThunderClan leader meowed, frowning at the spiky-furred warrior.

Maplelight listened in mingled shock, horror, and fury as

Spottedpaw went into a detailed explanation of Thistleclaw's actions towards her over the past moon. After walking in on their conversation today, she had figured out what Thistleclaw had done to her, but hearing it out loud was something else entirely. As she spoke, Sunstar's eyes began to darken with anger.

"And you say this has been happening ever since you became an apprentice?" he asked. Spottedpaw nodded.

"We can speak for her as well," Maplelight meowed. "Earlier today, Bluefur and I were going to deliver herbs when we overheard Thistleclaw talking to Spottedpaw. He was saying what a shame it was that someone as pretty as she chose to be a medicine cat. And...he also told her that if she were a warrior apprentice, there would be a lot of toms interested in her and that her kits would be as beautiful as her."

"I wanted to tell someone before, but I didn't know if it was a good idea," Spottedpaw admitted. "I mean, the things he said sounded really nice, but it just felt...weird. But I thought if I told anyone what was happening, I would sound ungrateful."

"It's not ungrateful," Sunstar reassured her, resting his tail-tip on her shoulder. "Thistleclaw is a senior warrior and he was trying to take advantage of you. It's natural that you were uncertain and scared about speaking up. The only one who did anything wrong was him. You have nothing to feel guilty about, Spottedpaw."

Spottedpaw nodded, her amber eyes filling with relief. Maplelight let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. Of course, she hadn't doubted that Sunstar would believe the young medicine cat apprentice's story, but it was a relief to hear his confirmation for herself. Before she could say anything else, however, Thistleclaw suddenly pushed his way forward.

"Hold on a moment!" he protested, glaring around at Spottedpaw, who shrank back at his obvious anger. "You don't seriously believe what she's saying, do you? It's obvious that Bluefur and Maplelight were just trying to use Spottedpaw to get me in trouble!"

"Get you in trouble?" Bluefur repeated disbelievingly. "We don't

need to do anything to get you in trouble. You do a fine job of that on your own."

Thistleclaw glared at her, his eyes flashing with rage and hatred. Before he could attack, however, Sunstar stood up and forced the gray and white warrior away from Bluefur.

"Enough," he growled. "Thistleclaw, after seeing your behavior, I have no reason to doubt any of Spottedpaw's claims. You will stay in the warriors' den under guard while I discuss what to do with my senior warriors. Maplelight, I want you to get Swiftbreeze for me. She should know what Thistleclaw did to her daughter. Bluefur, find one other warrior and stand guard over him."

Maplelight and Bluefur nodded and turned away, walking out of the den with Spottedpaw between them. Thistleclaw glowered for another few heartbeats, but not even he would defy Sunstar twice. Slowly, he walked after his Clanmates before quickening his pace in order to catch up with Maplelight.

"This isn't over," he hissed, his breath hot on her face. "I won't let you get away with this, kittypet. You'll be crowfood once I'm through with you."

"I'd like to see you try," Maplelight growled back. If Thistleclaw thought he was going to frighten her now, he was very mistaken.

Bluefur led Thistleclaw away to the warriors' den, pausing along the way to speak to Thrushpelt. After a brief exchange, the sandy-gray warrior took up the rear, effectively blocking Thistleclaw in between them. Satisfied that Spottedpaw's tormentor wouldn't be escaping anytime soon, Maplelight turned to speak to the tortoiseshell molly.

"Well, I should get Swiftbreeze now. Do you want to come with me or would you rather go back to the medicine den and get some rest?" she asked gently.

However, Spottedpaw just shook her head. "I think I should come," she meowed quietly. "I want to be there when Sunstar tells her what happened."

"Alright," Maplelight replied, flicking Spottedpaw's shoulder gently with her tail.

Spottedpaw hesitated, then asked, "What do you think Sunstar will do to Thistleclaw?"

"I don't know," Maplelight admitted. "He'll probably want to talk about what his punishment should be with the senior warriors. But one thing's for sure, Thistleclaw won't get away with this. We'll make sure of that."

Later that afternoon, Maplelight was in the middle of sharing a meal with Tigerclaw when Sunstar gave the call to convene beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting. Taking a deep breath, she rose to her paws and padded over to the edge of the clearing. At last, the moment of truth had arrived, and they would finally find out what punishment Sunstar had decided upon for Thistleclaw.

A few tail-lengths away, Spottedpaw was seated in between her parents, Adderfang and Swiftbreeze. Maplelight winced slightly as she remembered the fury in the queen's eyes when she learned of what Thistleclaw had done to her daughter. If Thistleclaw had been present at the time, Maplelight was certain that he would have been incinerated on the spot. As she watched, Redpaw and Willowpaw padded over to sit next to their sister as well.

Finally, Thistleclaw emerged from the warriors' den, following after Bluefur and Thrushpelt. Whatever fight he had left in him was gone now. His head was bowed and his tail dragged across the ground. Maplelight felt her lip curl into a sneer at the sight of him. Trust Thistleclaw to put on a regretful face when he was being faced with the possibility of exile for his actions.

Once the Clan was settled, Sunstar began to speak. "I'll keep it plain," he meowed, his eyes dark. "One of our warriors has been attempting to manipulate, harass, and torment our medicine cat apprentice. So Thistleclaw," he went on, staring down at the gray and white tom, "do you have anything to say for yourself?"

Yowls of shock and anger erupted from the surrounding cats. Maplelight saw a few warriors turn on Thistleclaw, baring their teeth. Rosetail and Poppydawn stared at the spiky-furred warrior, their eyes filled with cold disappointment and fury.

"I knew it," Tigerclaw growled, glaring at his former mentor. Maplelight glanced over at her mate.

"You did?" she asked.

Tigerclaw nodded. "I suspected that was what he was doing, but I didn't want to say anything without solid proof," he replied. "Even if Thistleclaw is just about the least popular cat in the Clan right now, he is still a senior warrior."

"I guess it's lucky we walked in on them when we did, in that case," Maplelight murmured.

After a while, the clamor finally died down. As soon as the last warrior had quieted themselves, Sunstar spoke up again. His normally warm, gentle eyes were cold and reproachful, and Maplelight felt herself shiver involuntarily.

"Thistleclaw, I have given you multiple chances to prove yourself to be a loyal warrior, and you have failed every single one," the ThunderClan leader continued. "You had your apprentice attack a kit. You've started multiple unnecessary border fights. Now, I find out that you've been manipulating and tormenting an apprentice. Spottedpaw has been forced to live in fear and confusion because of you."

Thistleclaw didn't say anything. Instead, he simply looked up at Sunstar, his face utterly devoid of emotion.

"It is not enough to simply exile you," Sunstar meowed in a voice like ice. "If we just send you away, you'll just do the same thing to another innocent kit. Either that, or you'll murder the next unsuspecting apprentice who happens to cross your path. As the leader of ThunderClan, it is my job to ensure the safety of my warriors and the forest."

The gray and white warrior blinked slowly. Maplelight stiffened slightly, pressing herself against Tigerclaw as she realized what Sunstar was about to do.

"I call upon my warrior ancestors to look down upon this cat," Sunstar called out, looking to the sky. "He has disgraced the name of warrior and brought shame upon his Clan. Therefore, I sentence this blight upon the forest to death. Never will he be allowed to walk among your ranks."

The entire Clan was silent as Sunstar delivered Thistleclaw's sentence. Despite the lack of a verbal response, however, Maplelight could tell that they agreed with his decision. Sunstar was right; if Thistleclaw was allowed to walk away, he would be sure to torment other kits in the same way he had done to Spottedpaw. Death was the only viable option.

"I need at least four of my senior warriors to assist with this criminal's execution," Sunstar meowed.

Adderfang stood up. "I will help," he growled, glaring at Thistleclaw.

"And me," Swiftbreeze added.

"Count me in," Bluefur spoke up.

"I'll help as well," Tigerclaw meowed.

"And I'll be there as well, and that should be enough," Sunstar concluded. "That is all. Everyone who volunteered, lead the prisoner out of the camp. The rest of you may go back to your regular duties."

"I'll see you when we get back," Tigerclaw murmured, licking her cheek.

"Stay safe," she meowed. "I'll make sure Spottedpaw is alright."

She watched as Thistleclaw was forced out through the gorse tunnel before turning around and walking over to join Spottedpaw and her siblings. The younger molly looked up at her as she approached, her

eyes shining with relief and gratitude.

"You're safe now," Maplelight meowed gently. "Thistleclaw won't ever hurt you again."

"Thank you," Spottedpaw meowed. "I know I keep saying it, but really...thank you. I couldn't have done this without you and Bluefur."

"Don't mention it," the calico warrior answered. "I'm just glad that we caught Thistleclaw before things went much further."

Not long after, Sunstar and the rest of the patrol returned, their paws soaked with blood. As soon as she saw them, Maplelight walked over to Tigerclaw, who greeted her with a gentle lick to her ears. She noted with relief that the dark tabby didn't seem to be sporting any new injuries aside from a small cut on his ear.

"Did everything go well?" she asked.

Tigerclaw nodded. "He tried to escape, but there was no way he was getting away from all five of us," he meowed.

"What did you do with the body?" Maplelight asked curiously.

"We took it to the Thunderpath. After everything he did, he doesn't deserve a warrior's burial," Bluefur answered. "The monsters can take care of him instead."

Maplelight nodded, exhaling slowly. "I guess that takes care of that," she murmured.

She gave a yawn, feeling a wave of exhaustion wash over her. Despite her weariness, however, Maplelight was satisfied. It had been a long day, but if nothing else, at least Spottedpaw was safe from Thistleclaw now. At the end of the day, that was all that mattered.

"Good redence," hissed Reedshine.

Murmurs of agreement echoed around the cave.

I believed the song above represents the chapter correctly. Also a fitting end to Thistleclaw, don't you think?

A/N

I am discontinuing this story. Sorry, but I no longer have motivation for this story. If someone wants to pick it up please tell me first.